

LEARNING MADE EASY



2nd Edition

Sports Psychology

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Real-life examples of
sports psychology at play

Expert advice for staying
at the top of your game

Techniques for
athletic success

Leif Smith, PsyD
Todd Kays, PhD

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dummies[®]
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2nd Edition

**by Leif H. Smith, PsyD,
and Todd M. Kays, PhD**

**for
dummies®**
A Wiley Brand

Sports Psychology For Dummies®, 2nd Edition

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Introduction

Sports psychology is a relatively new field, but it's one of the fastest-growing areas in sports performance. Professional sports are big money, and teams want a return on their investment in their players. So it should come as no surprise that every NFL, NBA, MLB, and NHL team employs someone trained in sports psychology to assist them with helping players work through mental blocks, slumps, anxiety and depression issues, and general decreases in performance.

We wrote this book because we want to share the information that we teach to elite athletes and teams with the general public. Sports psychologists can be expensive, and most athletes who are just looking for a way to get the edge in their sports participation can't afford to fork over thousands of dollars. With this book, you don't have to — you hold in your hands the same information we share with our clients, for a tiny fraction of the cost.

In the past ten years, we have seen the greatest demand for our services from the middle school and high school student athlete populations. This is great news, because it means that parents understand how important the mental side of sports is, and you can learn from this book many of the mental skills used by some of the best athletes in the world!

This book is packed full of information that can help athletes get more out of their physical talent. We've filled this book with techniques and skills that we teach to professional and Olympic athletes — skills that you can apply in your own training immediately, starting today.

About This Book

Most sports psychology books provide good stories and education on sports psychology concepts, but they don't take the next step and cover actual techniques and strategies that athletes can use. In this book, we do exactly that.

Plus, this book is organized for busy athletes who are on the go and don't have a lot of time to waste. The information is easy to access and written in plain English, without any psychobabble to bog you down. All you need is a thirst for knowledge and a willingness to work hard to reach your goals — we bring the rest.

We don't use many special conventions in this book, but there are a few you should be aware of:

- » When we want to share a story from our practice as sports psychologists, we refer to ourselves by our first names, so you can tell which of us is telling you the story. For example, we may say, "Leif was working with a professional hockey team . . ." or "Todd's client was a young tennis phenom. . . ." When you see the names Leif and Todd, just remember that's us.
- » Whenever we define a new term, we put it in *italics*, and define it shortly thereafter, often in parentheses.

To make the content more accessible, we divided it into five parts:

- » **Part 1, *Getting the Winning Edge: Sports Psychology Fundamentals*:** This part introduces the important basic principles of sports psychology. We start by telling you how to build your mental toughness, an essential skill for any competitive athlete. Then we turn to goal setting, because you're more likely to get somewhere you want to be if you know where you're going. We show you how to monitor your motivation and boost it when you need to. Finally, we give you the information you need to increase your confidence, because without confidence in your own skills and abilities, it doesn't matter how talented you are or how hard you've worked.
- » **Part 2, *Your Mental Toolkit for Success*:** In this part, we dig into some key concepts that you need to know in your pursuit of competitive greatness. This part is basically the applied mental drills that you can use in your everyday life, including focus, imagery, routines, being mindful, and dealing with pressure.
- » **Part 3, *Hot Topics in Sports Psychology*:** This part begins by exploring common mental health issues everyone, including athletes, are facing in today's fast-paced and pressure-filled world. It covers what high school athletes need to know about the college recruiting process. It also explores the path to becoming a sports psychologist, as well as how to use mental tools in everyday life.
- » **Part 4, *The Sports Psychology-Savvy Coach*:** This part is all for coaches, including how they can use sports psychology drills and concepts in practices and competitions. Coaches can help their players and team be more successful through this applied section on sports psychology. If you are a coach, this section is written specifically for you!
- » **Part 5, *The Part of Tens*:** This part explains how you can apply sports psychology principles and concepts to become a better competitor, no matter the sport. It also discusses how parents can become better at parenting young athletes. The book ends with a chapter on how you can become a better leader as an athlete and lead your team and fellow athletes to victory.

Foolish Assumptions

In writing this book, we made some assumptions about you. One or more of the following should apply to you:

- » You're an athlete with particular goals that you'd like to achieve, and you think that the mental aspect of your training and performance can benefit from further understanding and practice. You're willing to work hard to achieve your goals.
- » You're a coach and you want to use sports psychology to help your athletes achieve their goals. You recognize that training isn't just physical.
- » You're a parent of an athlete, and you want to support your kid's athletic career in all the right ways.

Chapter 17 covers all you need to know if you're considering a career in sports psychology, so if that describes you, we've got you covered as well!

Icons Used in This Book

Like all *For Dummies* books, this book's margins are sprinkled with icons to help direct your attention to certain concepts, definitions, and interesting information. Here's a key to what they mean:



TIP

This icon directs you to techniques that world-class athletes use to improve their performance.



REMEMBER

This book is a reference book, which means you don't have to commit it to memory — you can come back to it when you need it. But when you see this icon, you're sure to find information that we think is so crucial that you need to remember it.



ANECDOTE

This icon alerts you to stories or examples of some of our work with athletes from all walks of life.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

This icon is for people who can't get enough of sports psychology principles. You can skip reading these paragraphs without consequence — but if you really want the inside scoop, read on!



WARNING

When you see this icon, you can be sure we're alerting you to a danger or pitfall of some sort — something you should avoid.

Beyond the Book

In addition to what you're reading right now, this product also comes with a free access-anywhere Cheat Sheet that includes tips on creating your project schedule, shortcut keys, and helpful websites to hone your expertise. To get this Cheat Sheet, simply go to www.dummies.com and type **Sports Psychology For Dummies Cheat Sheet** in the Search box.

Where to Go from Here

This book isn't linear — you don't have to read it from beginning to end, like a novel. Each chapter is self-contained, so you can start anywhere you want, and skip around as you like. You can use the table of contents and index to guide you, but here are a few suggestions for places to begin: If you're new to sports psychology — you've only heard about it but you've never practiced any sports psychology techniques — start with Part 1 for a good foundation. If you want to improve in a specific area, like focus or managing pressure, turn to the appropriate chapters in Part 2, where we discuss many mental tools that we have used in our work with athletes over the past 20-plus years. If you want to learn about the current trends and hot topics in sports psychology, then make Part 3 your destination. If you're looking for ways to improve your team's performance, Part 4 is for you. And if you're a parent or coach who wants to use sports psychology to help the athletes in your life, or you want to become a better leader on your team, head to Part 5.

We hope you enjoy using this book to help you accomplish your goals. We also hope you share with us your success stories and accomplishments, and what you've found helpful in this book. Feel free to email us directly at DrSmith@personalbestconsulting.com and DrKays@athleticmindinstitute.com. You can also find us on YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter. Just search for our names and stay connected to keep learning how to use the concepts we teach in this book.

1

**Getting the
Winning Edge:
Sports
Psychology
Fundamentals**

IN THIS PART . . .

Get to know what sports psychology is and its overall application

Learn what your ideal mental profile is for maximum performance

Know and begin to apply the basics of effective goal setting

Understand motivation in sports and learn how to maximize your own

Learn what confidence really is and ways to build your swagger

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Knowing what sports psychology can do for you
- » Seeing your mind as a tool for success
- » Using sports psychology to prepare for competition
- » Understanding the hottest trends in sports psychology
- » Drawing on sports psychology tools as a coach

Chapter **1**

Introducing Sports Psychology and Mental Training

You’ve probably heard of elite athletes working with sports psychologists and pro teams having sports psychologists on staff. But what exactly is sports psychology, and is it limited to the pros?

Sports psychology is simply the practical application of psychological principles in a sports setting. It’s used to help an athlete or team improve their performance — and it absolutely *isn’t* limited to professional athletes. In fact, we’re seeing sports psychology used at all levels of sport. The field of sports psychology provides benefits and knowledge to youth, high school, and college athletes, as well as to coaches, parents, administrators, sports medicine physicians, strength and conditioning coaches, dietitians, and physical therapists. It’s used in the more popular sports — such as soccer, football, golf, and tennis — as well as in lesser-known ones — such as judo, snowboarding, fencing, and cricket. Sports psychology is even

being used and applied in the non-sport realms, including medicine, education, business, politics, organizational development, and the military. Its benefits and uses are growing by leaps and bounds throughout the world. It's an exciting time to be tapping into the benefits of sports psychology!

The good news is that you don't have to pay hundreds or thousands of dollars to hire your own personal sports psychologist. With this book in your hands, you have an edge over other athletes and, most important, the ability to reach your highest potential.

Honing Your Sharpest Weapon: Your Mind

The greatest tool that any athlete has is the mind. The brain — that wonderful organ that regulates your breathing, controls your beating heart, and manages the rest of your body — is at the core of all successful sports performances.

Everybody knows that talent and physical skill play an enormous role in every athlete's success, but not many people understand the importance of the mind and how we use it. In fact, your mind is one of the most powerful pieces of sports equipment you'll ever own. It can make or break you.

By understanding the power of your mind and being able to use it to your advantage, you can improve your performance. Sports psychology can help you to

- » Manage performance anxiety
- » Use visualization and imagery to improve your performance
- » Increase and maintain your confidence
- » Improve and maintain your level of motivation
- » Relax under pressure
- » Set and achieve goals
- » Manage your energy levels
- » Use routines to be consistent in your performance
- » Bounce back from injuries and setbacks
- » Manage and address conflicts with coaches and teammates

- » Focus in critical moments and extend the duration of your concentration
- » Manage stress and other mental health issues
- » Better communicate with others
- » Know yourself better

Knowing how your mind influences your sports performance

Your mind, which is the end product of all the wonderful thinking processes that occur in your physical brain, has a powerful impact on your sports performance. In fact, it has been having that powerful impact previously, even if you weren't aware of it. Have you ever felt fear before a match, competition, or game? That's your mind at work. Have you ever performed well, but unexpectedly? That was your mind at work also. Finally, have you ever achieved an important goal in your sport, even though it took a long time and a lot of hard work along the way? Once again, that came from the efforts of your mind.

Our mind influences our performance, both in and out of sport, and this book helps you understand how to affect changes in your mind that will produce amazing results in your performance. From setting goals (Chapter 3) to building motivation and confidence (Chapters 4 and 5) to using powerful tools and techniques that professionals use (Chapters 6–12), you learn how to direct your mind to govern your body, heart, and attitude — all to produce the results you want in sports competition.

Discovering your ideal mindset in sports performance

What is the ideal mindset for maximum performance in sport? Is there one? We (Leif and Todd) are asked this question all the time. Although performance is a combination of talent, circumstances, and effort, performing at your best can indeed become a habit. When you learn the ideal mindset for performing at your best, you can replicate it, over and over again.

Chapters 9 and 10 can help you get a jumpstart on your competition and start developing your ideal mindset.

Building your ideal mindset with awareness and the right processes

Building this ideal mindset, much like making any change in your life, starts with awareness. You need to be aware, first, of the mindset that has been holding you back in competition. You also most importantly need to be aware of the mindset you possess when you are performing at your best. We are taught to focus on the negative and be self-critical, but we need to spend more time and energy on what we are doing right!

Having a good supporting cast of family, friends, coaches, and teammates around you helps you do this, and from there you can begin to take the tools that you learn in this book to build a better mindset, step by step. This is the essence — the process — by which you can begin to perform better, at higher levels, and more consistently.

For more information on ways to start developing this process, check out Chapters 2 and 8.

Understanding your motivation

Motivation can come from within (we call this *intrinsic* motivation), and it can come from things outside of yourself, such as money, fame, or status (we call this type of motivation *extrinsic* motivation). When you understand how to utilize both types of motivation to your advantage, you hasten your development as a complete athlete, combining mind and body together to maximize the talent you already have for your sport.

Chapter 4 is a powerful chapter, and it gives you the tools you need to understand and improve your motivation in sports.

Understanding and building confidence for your athletic performance

One of the wonderful aspects of sports psychology principles and techniques is that they're applicable on and off the field. They help you improve your confidence. And all improved performances — on and off the field — result from a gradual improvement in your confidence. The more confident you are, the more risks you take, and the more rewards and positive consequences you experience. All successful athletes know that when they're confident and comfortable, their chances for success are dramatically higher, even though their preparation and physical fitness may be the same.

Confidence frees you to perform, compete, and reach your highest potential. And confidence is not an all-or-nothing game — it changes and develops over time. We want you to be in a place where you fear less and dream and create more! When you build confidence, you can try new things without fearing how you will look in front of others or worrying what they will think of you.

In Chapter 5, we show you the art and the science of building true confidence. We like to call this *swagger*. We help you take the guesswork out of the process of improving your self-confidence and give you a solid framework from which to improve your performance in sports. We also show you how best to address and manage those times when your confidence drops. Your goal should be to maximize the times when your confidence is high and minimize the times when it's not. This is one of the secrets of confidence in sports.

Building, Preparing, and Practicing Your Mental Toolkit

In developing your mind through sports psychology training, you want to develop your own personal “mental toolkit” that contains the techniques and strategies you need to strengthen your mental muscle. Just as you can use equipment to help you improve your physical fitness, there are tools you can use to do the same for your mind.

Focus is one of the most critical mental skills to develop for success in athletics. It's one of the most common assets of successful athletes, and a lack of focus is a primary reason for mental errors, mistakes, and the inability to perform under pressure. In Chapter 6, we give you Tool #1, “Mastering the Art of Focus,” so that you can take your focus up a notch.

Mental imagery can help you build confidence, manage pressure, recover from mistakes and poor performance, and prepare for practice and competition. In Chapter 7, we offer you Tool #2, “Seeing Is Believing,” and we explain what imagery is and how it works, giving you specific steps to use the tool of imagery in your sport.

As an athlete, you're constantly working toward specific goals, and you are creating habits that will propel you toward victory. In Chapter 9, we introduce you to Tool #4, “Winning Habits,” and help you understand and harness the power of routines in your sport so that you can become more consistent in both your preparation and your results.

Seeing Sports Psychology in Action

As you use your mental tools (see the preceding section), you'll see the direct benefits of sports psychology in action, in practice and in competition.

As you practice and compete, you face all kinds of pressure. Being a great athlete is about being able to perform your best when the pressure is on. In Chapter 10, you learn about Tool #5, "Handling Pressure," where we give you specific strategies for improving your ability to do exactly that.

And, because mistakes are a regular part of the sports world, in Chapter 11, we offer you Tool #6, "Handling Adversity," and we give you lots of advice for becoming more resilient. From simple mistakes in competition to longer slumps, we show you how to move on from the mistakes of your past and focus on performing your best in the present.

As an athlete, you have to manage your energy levels before a competition to harness the mental and physical energy you need when it counts. In Chapter 12, you learn about Tool #7, "Sharpening Your Awareness." There, we explain how to calm down and pump yourself up, so your energy resources are always there for you when you need them.

Knowing the Hot Trends in Sports Psychology Today

Mental health issues are one of the hottest topics discussed in the field of athletics today. Anxiety and depression aren't just battled off the court or field — athletes have to battle them on the court, too, and we discuss this topic in greater detail in Chapter 13.



REMEMBER

Managing stress is such an important topic in sports psychology today that we chose to dedicate another chapter to it entirely. After reading Chapter 14, you'll be better prepared to understand the sources of stress in your life and manage them more effectively in the future.

We get so many requests from parents and high school athletes to help them navigate the ever-changing recruitment process from high school to college athletics that we devote a whole chapter about it — Chapter 15. It is a complicated process, and we believe that this chapter simplifies the process.

Ever wonder how the skills in this book can be applied outside of sport? Well, wait no longer, because Chapter 16, “Using Sports Psychology Skills in Daily Life,” is written just for you!

Since writing the first edition of this book in 2010, the field of sports psychology has expanded so dramatically in popularity that we get requests on a weekly basis from students interested in the field asking us for direction and career advice. What a wonderful development! Thus, we dedicated an entire chapter — Chapter 17 — to exploring the career path of a sports psychologist. If you are a student with interest in this field, this chapter is written with you in mind.



REMEMBER

Sports psychology is a growing and ever-changing field of study and applied techniques, and this popularity is due in part to how applicable sports psychology is to life outside of sports, too.

Becoming a Sports Psychology-Savvy Coach

Coaches are constantly looking for that extra edge that will put them over the top in the ultracompetitive sports world. With that in mind, they frequently turn to sports psychology to learn better ways to understand their players, motivate their teams, and get more from the talent they have at their disposal.

Every day, coaches see athletes with incredible talent who can perform in practice, but who can’t carry that performance into competition. They know and understand that the mindset of their athletes is often what determines their success.

If you’re a coach, you’ll find plenty of advice throughout this book that you can use to help your athletes be their best. But we devote Chapters 18 and 19 in particular to you. There, you find strategies for helping your athletes improve their focus and perform under pressure, as well as mental drills you can utilize with your team to enhance and improve their mental development alongside their physical development.



REMEMBER

Don’t limit yourself to Chapters 18 and 19 if you’re a coach. The advice we give to athletes throughout this book is information you can share with your players individually or as a team to help them reach their potential.

- » Determining your ideal mindset
- » Using journaling to hone your mindset
- » Assessing and improving your mindset
- » Getting into the zone

Chapter 2

Starting with the End in Mind: Know Your Ideal Athlete Mindset

Knowing your ideal mental state is a critical step in building your mind for consistent high-level performance. Most people habitually criticize themselves for even the smallest of mistakes. It becomes a bad habit that they don't know how to break. When asking athletes, performers, and everyday people about their past negative experiences and mistakes, they can usually quickly recall a long list of them. These are the experiences and incidents that stand out in our brains. Our "default" mental state, unfortunately, is usually negative. It is an almost automatic response. As a culture, we are trained to focus on the negatives in our everyday lives. There is an evolutionary and biological reason for this fact as well (i.e., fear kept people alive thousands of years ago — because without focusing on the possibility of danger around them, they could have easily been attacked by a hungry animal).

Think about it for yourself. Do you focus on the positive things you are doing in terms of your performance? Or do you focus on the negative? What are your

thoughts about this response from one of our professional athletes, who had just made the World Cup Soccer Team:

“I cannot believe I had such an awful practice today. Why did they even keep me on the national team?”

He did not even take a few seconds to celebrate his accomplishment of making the World Cup Soccer Team for his nation! Clearly, the battle to stay positive in our brains is a very real one.



ANECDOTE

Here’s another example from a high school softball player we were working with. She had gone 1 for 4 at the plate, no errors in the field, and pitched three solid innings that game. She did happen to pitch at the time when a tying run scored from the opposing team, however. Her team went on to lose, but she spent almost a week beating herself up for that one pitch (and the pitch was a good one — the hitter was very good). Her inner critic took over for days! She took the loss personally and did not consider that there were three fielding errors by her teammates, or that her team’s batting average at the plate that game was about .200, and the opposing team was highly ranked nationwide.

The point we are making here is simply that neither of these athletes took the time to think about, absorb, and celebrate the positive aspects of their performance. This is where having an ideal mindset can help, however. If you do not work on your ideal mindset, you cannot practice it, refine it, or master it. Thus, if you infrequently pay attention to when you perform well and frequently obsess when you do not (usually due to a mistake or two), your default negative mindset will continue, and this is not helpful for performing at your best.

Tapping Into Your Ideal Mindset

The first step is building awareness of what your ideal mindset can be. A good place to start is to make a list of some of your best performances. Speak with your coach, who can help you come up with some of these. Ask your friends, a teammate, or a parent or family member. As you discuss these performances, write them down in a performance journal or verbalize them in a voice notes app on your cell phone. Use the following questions to help jog your brain:

- » How were you behaving? Smiling, laughing, cheering on teammates, communicating, bouncing back after a mistake?
- » What were you thinking about? Maybe nothing? Something simple, like “this play” or “breathe” or “be here now?”

- » What did you experience emotionally? Calmness? Focus? Excitement? Lightness? Ease? Confidence?
- » What do you notice about your body? Were your muscles tense? Loose? Was your heart rate fast or slow or moderate? Was your breathing quick and shallow or deep, slow, and comfortable?

Once you learn more about your ideal mindset by logging your past great performances, you can begin to practice “re-experiencing” this mindset over and over again with the other tools included in this book. However, if you do not cultivate this mindset ahead of time, you will be simply trying to find the door in a completely dark room.



ANECDOTE

Todd frequently uses the following analogy with his athletes and performers. He tells them that he wants to meet at Starbucks for their next meeting. Since there are probably about 50 of these stores within a 20-mile radius in Columbus, it could be any of a number of locations. So what are they going to do? Drive to each coffee place and see if he is there? Call each store and ask if there is a good-looking sports psychologist in the store? Or Todd can just tell them the exact location. That way, they do not have to guess. They may know where it is already or simply plug it into their GPS. In the same way, if you know your ideal mindset for great performance, you can practice it right away. Or you can just let your mind continue to criticize you and run on its default setting. The choice is yours.

Discovering your ideal performance mindset

Here are some steps you can take to start learning what your ideal performance mindset is and to utilize it every time you compete.

Start with questions you want to address about past great performances (yesterday or last year, in practice or in competition), and then consider the following advice:

- » **Describe the time and place you were competing.** Remember it as vividly as possible, as if you are there, competing, right now.
- » **Describe what made this one of your best performances.** Remember that you may not have won the game or the ideal mindset may have only been present for a small time during your game or competition. Some examples might be batting 4 for 4 at the plate, scoring a career high in points, shooting your lowest score in golf, or beating a top-ranked opponent.

» Just as you did previously, answer these prompts:

- *Behaviors*: Were you smiling, laughing, cheering on teammates, communicating, or bouncing back after a mistake?
- *Thoughts*: What were you thinking about? Maybe nothing? Something simple like, “this play” or “breathe” or “be here now?”
- *Emotions*: What did you experience emotionally? Calm? Excitement? Lightness? Ease? Confidence?
- *Body*: What do you notice about your body? Were your muscles tense or loose? Was your heart rate fast or slow or moderate? Was your breathing short and shallow or easy, deep, and comfortable?

» **Identify important information by writing in your journal.** (Remember: Every athlete should have a performance journal — those who use a journal effectively and consistently get better quicker.) It can be a small journal that you can keep in your athletic bag, but just make it a durable one, as we all know how we toss around our athletic bags. This journal should go with you everywhere.

» **Journal continuously and consistently each time you have a great performance.** You want to key in with *specifics* and *be clear* about what exactly was happening during your performance.

» **Spend time visualizing and burning these performance details into your brain.** Read Chapter 7, on imagery, to learn more about how to do this like the pros.

» **Continue to re-read some of your entries in this journal as a mental training drill from time to time.** Remember, if you do not practice your physical skills (for example, your tennis forehand or your free-throws), you won't improve. By the same token, how can you get better at building your ideal mindset if you don't practice and perform this simple drill?

» **Journaling doesn't need to take a long time.** Maybe at times you will decide to enjoy reliving the experience and it will be an incredible and long journal entry that you may refer back to for years, but it also can be a simple jotting down of notes (or bullet points) after a performance. Just remember, the quality of a practice *does* make a difference (as you know) and, therefore, so does the quality of journaling and mental training. Think about if a field kicker spent their practice time using only about 50 percent of their focus. How would you predict that to work out?

» **Try to journal as soon after the experience as you can, while the memory is fresh in your brain.** You can do this before you leave the locker room or field, or you can journal while on the bus or car ride home. The sooner you do so, the better the details and exact recall of your performance.

Performing without thinking

Personal best performances typically do not involve much thinking, only great physical and mental preparation.

An important awareness point here is that many times when we perform our best, we are not thinking, at least consciously anyway.



ANECDOTE

When asked by a reporter about his mental training, one of our professional athletes said “These are the moments I train for all year. I know these moments do not necessarily happen as much as I would like, but I could do anything with the puck tonight. I knew exactly where to pass and there was no stopping me on the offensive side — I knew it was going to be a multiple-goal game. It just happened. I was not thinking about anything. I did all the prep work — mind, body, and skill — with doc and it just happens sometimes.”

Another response on mindset from one of our golfers: “I was 30 yards out, had for some reason practiced it during the week, imagined in my mind and heart hundreds of times that this type of shot was going to happen. It just did. I knew it was going in after I hit it.”



REMEMBER

In working with thousands of athletes and performers from all over the world, it is obvious to us that one of our goals is to help them *not think* during performances. We can’t emphasize this point strongly enough: Mental training is about using your mind to get your body to follow.

Developing a Plan of Attack to Make it Consistent

If you want to consistently hit more first serves or obtain a higher free-throw percentage, you need to practice first serves or free-throws. Your mindset is no different. This book is all about providing ways for you to “practice your mindset” in that same manner. After all, perfect practice makes perfect, right? So how should you practice this? Consider these tips:

- » **Be consistent with your journal.** Journaling about your top performances once per month is not going to help you improve, just as decreasing your 100-backstroke time won’t happen if you practice it only once per month.

- » **Aim to journal about your best performances or top performance moments 4-5 times per week.** If you state that you are going to journal every single practice or every single day and miss one, don't beat yourself up and then give up. Expect that, on occasion, you will miss a time or two. That's okay. Keep going!
- » **Take 5-10 minutes before practice to read a journal entry or two about your top performances.** This process triggers those good memories in your mind and helps you connect with what it is to be in your ideal mental and emotional state right before practice. You then increase your chances of having a better practice. What do you think that will do to your confidence?
- » **If you have an extended break in action during a practice, game, or workout, take a quick glance at your journal again.** It is hard for all of us to stay focused for long periods of time, so good mental preparation can simply take the form of reminding ourselves what we want and need to be our best.
- » **After a game or competition, think about your great performance moments.** Jot down the important details. Remember, it does not have to be an entire game or competition. It might be one wrestling move, such as a first period double-leg takedown that you hit, but those moments are the critical ones to focus on!
- » **Spend 5-10 minutes, 3-4 times per week, and reimagine these moments** (see Chapter 7, on imagery). When you bring these images to your conscious mind and re-experience them in your body, you are training your body to become more familiar (and more comfortable) with this state of mind or being.

Consider these additional ways to track and keep connected to these great mindset moments:

- » Use voice notes on a computer or phone and simply describe in your own words what it was like.
- » Listen to podcasts from great athletes about what it is like for them when they have those incredible moments.
- » Listen to podcasts associated with this book about how to practice and learn your ideal zone of performance. Learning and improvement never stops.
- » Discuss these great moments with teammates, coaches, parents, and friends. Every time you do so, your heart and body connect to this mindset and it becomes more familiar. This is when your ideal mindset starts to happen more consistently.

Preparing your ideal mindset

There is a difference between preparation and practice. In this case, your preparation is going to be learning and developing your awareness of your ideal mindset. You can do this using all of the different ways mentioned in this chapter.

Practicing your mindset

When you practice your mindset, you have already prepared your mind to understand what your ideal mindset is. Then, you can use the steps mentioned in the chapter to develop your own practice routines. These routines should incorporate steps in your training and practice schedule. Also, feel free to create your own individual style of doing things. Be curious. Be creative. No judgment. Reread this chapter as a refresher every few months. The key is to make practicing your ideal mindset as common and normal as practicing your sports skills. However works best for you, do it!

Assessing and improving your mindset

This practice drill can easily be done when you are journaling, listening to a podcast on mindset, reading this or another book on mental training, or talking with a mental performance consultant or psychologist. Every time you do these drills, you are bringing to mind the importance of mindset development. The more you can do this, the more these skills can help you become aware of what you are doing well and what still needs improvement.



REMEMBER

It is important to focus on what you are doing well, and this mindset doesn't come naturally to humans (remember how the brain has a negative, fear-based default setting?). Practice making your ideal mindset your competitive mindset. Ask others around you what they see in your mental performance. You will be pleasantly surprised about what they will notice and tell you, and you can use those insights next time you practice crafting your ideal mindset.

Avoiding the mindset of perfection

If you want to improve your mindset, you also need to work on accepting yourself as human and imperfect.

In sports, athletes seem determined to pursue perfection at all costs. They talk and think about it so much that they actually start to believe that it exists. Here is an inevitable truth, however — perfection has not, does not, and will not ever exist. For you, or for others. You have high moments of excellence, but truly there is no perfection. So why keep pursuing it?



TIP

Rather than striving for perfection, what about the idea of pursuing “better”? Better performances. Better mindset. Better practice. Better technique. The idea of “better” is much more achievable, measurable, and doable than “perfection”! In sports, and in life, better equates to improved performances. It also leaves room for those moments when you aren’t performing at your best. In other words, it has all the upside and very little downside. So, instead of pursuing perfection as your ideal mindset, we encourage you to pursue “better.” You’ll see tremendous long-term results via this shift in thinking.

When you can accept that you are “perfectly imperfect,” you will not get down on yourself so much when you make a mistake or do not perform as you hoped. One of the greatest lessons that anyone can take from this book is the fact we are all perfectly imperfect — as coaches and athletes and human beings. We were designed to be different, and to perform differently. In fact, your long-term motivation will endure when you accept this fact and are not constantly criticizing yourself.

Slipping into the flow state or zone

Many athletes and people ask us how they can get into the “zone” or flow state, where most of the top performances occur. This is when athletes seem to perform without thinking. You might see athletes appear to be “in the zone” when you watch them on ESPN or maybe even at a local high school game. Yes, it is possible for everyone and anyone to be in the zone. And not just in athletics. You can be “in the zone” when it comes to playing music, doing a presentation, being at a job interview, or simply having a wonderful session with an athlete. The fact of the matter is that we do not “consciously” find the zone, even though we all know what it is. Think about a time when you performed out of your mind — typically some words to describe it include feeling like you were in slow motion, or that time stopped, and that you knew things were coming together. We have all been there — albeit not as often as we would like!



REMEMBER

The reality is that most athletes *accidentally* slip get into the zone. If you think about the zone as a subconscious state — or a state where no conscious thoughts are occurring — then your body is simply doing what you have trained it to do. *The zone isn’t your ideal performance mindset. It is the result of you training and developing your ideal performance mindset.* When you practice these mental skills consistently, you learn to develop your ideal performance mindset much more consistently. And when this happens, your odds of slipping into the zone or flow state of mind increase dramatically!

- » Setting effective goals
- » Establishing deadlines for each goal
- » Keeping track of your progress

Chapter 3

Setting Goals: Aiming High and Hitting the Bull's Eye

Most people miss the mark when it comes to goal setting, whether in sports or in life. The good news is, with this book in your hands, you won't be one of those people! So, why do most people fail at goal setting? Because they were never taught the simple secrets that comprise the art of making your dreams a reality, which is really all that goal setting is.

In this chapter, we introduce you to this art. We share with you the same information we've shared with thousands of other athletes who have come to us to work on setting and achieving goals. When you set goals correctly, your goals will allow you to achieve results that you never thought possible.



REMEMBER

GOAL SETTING AND MOTIVATION: TWO PEAS IN A POD

Motivation is the fuel that powers your goals toward becoming a reality. If you're not motivated and inspired by your goals, you won't achieve them. And if you don't have goals, you won't be motivated to improve.

A simple way to measure your level of motivation is to use what we call the get-out-of-bed test. Do your goals make you want to get out of bed and hurry toward their achievement? Do they keep you up at night, excited, unable to go to sleep because you're too busy pursuing them? If so, your level of motivation is strong. If not, then you need to set better, more inspiring goals. This does not mean you will *always* feel great about getting out of bed, for we are human, and sometimes our motivation ebbs and flows, but it should be there most of the time if you are seeking important goals and doing the goal-setting process in the correct manner.

Many athletes tell us that at times they lose their motivation to compete in their sports. They complain that it's no longer fun, that their coaches' demands annoy them, that their passion for training isn't what it used to be. When we ask these athletes what their current goals are, they usually say, "I don't know — I haven't thought about it." They're focused on the misery and pain and complaining. They've lost focus on their goals and the reasons they compete, and their motivation has declined because of it.

When you get into a car, you usually know your destination. When you start driving toward your destination, you're focused on making sure you reach it, which helps you adjust when you encounter obstacles, such as closed roads, traffic jams, and passing trains blocking the intersection. You're committed to reaching your destination, but you more than likely keep a flexible approach to getting there, depending on the circumstances and time of day. The same is true with goal setting in your sport. You need to know where you're headed. Then, after you've set inspiring goals, you need to stay flexible in your approach to making them come true. Obstacles will come in many forms — injuries, coaching decisions, sickness, and other unforeseen training issues. Your job as an athlete is to keep your mind focused on your goals, which, on occasion, requires that you take alternative routes to success.

Goal setting is both art and science. The key to good goal setting is outlining goals that inspire and motivate you. They should wake you up early and keep you up late at night!

Setting Effective Goals

Goal setting is really about being able to answer a couple simple questions:

- » Where do you want to go in your sport?
- » What will athletic success look like when you accomplish it?

In the following sections, we walk you through setting your long-term and intermediate goals, making sure your goals are specific and challenging, and setting timelines for your goals.

Determining your goals

Goals can be divided into the following categories:

- » **Long-term goals:** One to three years
- » **Midterm goals:** Six months to one year
- » **Short-term goals:** One to six months
- » **Immediate goals:** One day to one week

In order to achieve your goals, each goal should build on the last. In other words, goals should be successive and cumulative. If you want to be an all-American, you have to start by being all-conference. Before that, you have to get enough playing time to be noticed. Before that, you need to earn a spot on the team. Start with the end in mind when you set about determining your priorities and goals in your pursuit of athletic success.



TIP

Work with specialized and trusted coaches to provide perspective and education. For example, when it comes to fitness goals, strength and conditioning coaches and exercise specialists are key. A skills coach would be helpful if you're a tennis player wanting to improve the speed of your serve. Work with a sports psychologist to help understand and establish mental and emotional goals. Getting to your long-term goal takes time and expertise. Use your support team to help you.

Long-term goals

You need to start by setting your long-term goal — this is the goal that will guide and inspire you to greater heights as an athlete. It's usually set at about one to three years out. Anything longer than that is unrealistic as a timeline, since things change so rapidly in our current world.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GOALS AND PRIORITIES

What's the difference between a goal and a priority? A *goal* is an outcome around which you focus your attention — it's the purpose toward which your efforts are directed. A *priority*, on the other hand, is a goal that is more important to you than other goals. Priorities are simply the goals that are most important to your success. All goals are important, but as an athlete, you need to set priorities to help shape your destiny. Which goals you've prioritized as most important will determine the magnitude of your success in your sport. Choose your priorities wisely — they're critical to your success. It is important to remember that sometimes your priorities will involve setting certain goals in specific aspects of your sport development — such as a certain skill, a fitness area such as speed, or a mental area, such as learning to manage pressure and maintain poise more effectively.



TIP

For most athletes (professional and Olympic athletes use different timelines), one year or one season is the perfect timetable for long-term goals. Anything longer, and you risk losing focus and motivation.

Here are some examples of long-term goals:

- » Be the starting goalie on the team.
- » Improve my national recognition among college coaches.
- » Become all-conference.
- » Be one of the mentally toughest players in the state.



REMEMBER

Dream big. Make your goals big! Search within yourself for what you want to happen in one year. Don't place limits on yourself. Sure, you should be realistic (you aren't going to get a college scholarship if you decide to play football your senior year and you haven't played since the fourth grade), but too many people place limits on themselves before they even begin the goal-setting process. Limiting ourselves is probably one of the greatest human challenges we all make at times. And connected to this challenge is one of the greatest emotions that gets in the way — fear.

Midterm goals

Next, set approximately three midterm goals that you intend to achieve in about six months (or half a season). These goals should be what we like to call *process goals*, or goals that deal with how you plan on going about doing things. For

example, if your long-term goal is to become an all-conference athlete, your mid-term process goals might include the following:

- » Out-hustle every person on the field.
- » Be the best-conditioned athlete on the field.
- » Become more offensive minded.
- » Immediately let go of mistakes and recover from poor performance.



There is a difference between outcome goals and process goals. Outcome goals are *what* you're pursuing, and process goals are *how* you're pursuing it. Outcome goals are usually not within your control, but they help guide you to greater heights in sports and are many times the fuel and motivation for you; process goals are completely in your control and help increase the probability that you'll reach your outcome goals.

Short-term goals

Your short-term goals are ones that take one to six months and directly feed into your midterm goals. The accomplishment of the short-term goals is necessary for the success of the midterm goals. For example, if your midterm goal is to be the best-conditioned athlete on the field, you could set the following short-term goals:

- » Run 2 miles in 12 minutes.
- » Run the 40-yard dash in less than 5 seconds.
- » Improve my leg strength.
- » Practice my post-mistake mental-toughness routine every day in training.

These are sometimes called “performance” goals — where you attach actual statistics to the goal, such as running the 40-yard dash in under 5 seconds.

Immediate goals

After you've set your short-term goals, your immediate goals take over. Immediate goals are actions you engage in to better the chances of your short-term goals happening. So, if you take the short-term goal of running 2 miles in 12 minutes, the following are examples of immediate goals:

- » Meet with my strength and conditioning coach once a week.
- » Time my 2-mile run at the end of every week.

- » Perform a tempo run (set up by the trainer) four days a week.
- » Do cross-training four days a week.

Making your goals specific

When you walk into a grocery store, whether you’ve written down a list of items to buy or you have that list in your mind, it’s specific. It says more than just “food.” You know you need milk, bread, cereal, bananas, and so on. If you do show up at the store without a list, you’ll likely get home from the store, walk in the door, and realize you forgot something you needed.

The same is true for your goals in sports. The more specific you can be when you set your goals, the better your chances of achieving them. Clear and specific goals allow you to have laser-like focus in your pursuit of greatness. They leave little to chance or imagination, allowing you to channel your energy accordingly.

Here are some examples of specific and nonspecific goals:

Nonspecific Goals	Specific Goals
Get fit.	Run 2 miles in 12 minutes.
Serve well.	Have a first-service percentage of 60 percent.
Play hard.	Make three tackles per game.
Let go of my mistakes.	Follow my post-mistake routine in games.

When you say that you want to “play hard,” what exactly does that mean? How are you going to measure it? Playing hard could be turned into a specific goal, but as it stands, it’s broad, ambiguous, and lacking in clear direction.



REMEMBER

Specific goals are better because they increase your motivation and focus — you know exactly what you’re going after. You know what you’re working toward, and your mind will have an easier time stayed tuned into that. It is also important to set these goals before practice, optimally a week before. Then you know what you are going to do exactly. If you do not know your goals for practice, it is easy to become unfocused and underperform.

Setting goals that challenge you

In addition to being specific, your goals need to be challenging. They should push you beyond your comfort level and be slightly out of your reach. Setting your goals

slightly out of reach, or slightly higher than you originally plan, ensures that you'll be motivated to chase them and improve along the way.

If you set goals that are too easy, you'll become bored, you'll lose motivation, and you won't improve. You may feel good for a while — “Wow, I'm good — I'm accomplishing so many things!” — but this feeling won't last.

Have you ever noticed how much better *you* play when you play against athletes who are better than you? Yes, it's difficult, and your ego may take a bruising, but look how much you improve.



WARNING

At the same time, make sure you aren't setting unrealistic goals. A goal to become a state champion or make the national team may be challenging and realistic for some, but it may not be realistic for you where you are now. If you set this goal and expect it too soon, you may end up feeling frustrated and losing motivation. You're getting better — maybe *much* better — but you won't see it because you're focused on a goal that's beyond your reach.



REMEMBER

You want to set goals that are challenging enough to motivate you, but not so unrealistic that they discourage you. For example, we both challenge each athlete we work with to set goals slightly above what they think they can achieve. This goes back to the courage to aim high and dream big! Instead of just making the lineup, aim to be a starter. Instead of performing well, work to become all-conference. Higher goals build confidence, and they also push you to think and dream bigger in your pursuit of becoming a better athlete.

Setting deadlines for each goal

When you've set goals that are specific and challenging, you'll want to add time-lines to each goal. Doing so takes your goals from theory to actual practice — in other words, setting deadlines makes your goals more likely to become reality. Setting deadlines helps you remain focused on your goals, so that they don't exist simply as dreams — they become real. Examples include an athlete wanting to be able to leg press a certain amount of weight in 30 days or a tennis player wanting to hit 200 first serves with at least 50 percent accuracy going in within two weeks.



TIP

Setting deadlines for your goals is one of the key factors that separates good athletes from elite ones. If you don't set deadlines, you'll likely allow other things to get in the way. Before you know it, the day, week, month, or even year has gone by and the goal is still sitting there unaccomplished.



TIP

Put your deadlines for accomplishing your goals on a calendar, and review that calendar regularly. You should know, every day, what you're doing to reach your immediate, short-term, midterm, and long-term goals.

Working with tiny goals

Tiny goals are goals that are smaller in scale and easier to achieve. They are an important part of the goal-setting process, because they help build momentum and confidence along the way to those bigger goals that you are hoping to achieve. For instance, if your ultimate goal is to make the varsity high school soccer team, that goal should be made up of much smaller, or tiny, goals:

- » Have coach learn your name
- » Get to know the other kids on the team
- » Practice juggling every day for 5 minutes
- » Eat a much more nutritious breakfast every day
- » Get to bed before midnight daily
- » Stretch more often
- » Drink more water
- » Buy a new soccer ball
- » Watch a motivational sports movie like *Rocky*

These tiny goals are deceptive in nature, since they initially appear to be too simple and too easy to achieve. However, therein lies the rub, so to speak: The fact that these goals are non-threatening to your brain (remember, our brains are wired to avoid things that appear to be painful) means that you will be more likely to pursue them. When you are more likely to engage in them, you will be more likely to achieve them, and when you achieve these tiny goals, your confidence will rise!

Tiny goals are an underestimated method for getting and keeping momentum in your goal-setting plan for this very reason. Small boosts of confidence along the path to your bigger goals improve the odds that you will be successful.



REMEMBER

Setting small, easily achievable goals allows you to create momentum that you can use to increase your motivation along the way to your bigger goals!

Tracking Your Success in Reaching Your Goals

Make sure that you're tracking your success in reaching your athletic goals as you go. That way, instead of wondering how you became successful, you'll have a good idea of which strategies worked, and which strategies didn't work. You'll know

what you did well, and what was effective. And you'll know what you didn't do well, and which tactics were ineffective.

You must keep track of your athletic skills, your fitness levels and physical strengths and weaknesses, and your mental toughness and abilities. If you don't track these, how will you know that you've reached your goal, or that you're even heading in the right direction? What if you need to make adjustments along the way? If you don't follow and track your success, you'll never know.

In this section, we show you how to hold yourself accountable to your goals and measure your progress. We also introduce the concept of adjusting your goals, and let you know that doing so is perfectly acceptable.

Holding yourself accountable

One of the defining characteristics of great athletes is the ability to hold *themselves* accountable for their own goals and progress — instead of requiring another teammate, athlete, or coach to hold them accountable. The best athletes place the responsibility for their goals, training, and results directly on their own shoulders. As an athlete, you want to do the same thing. Holding yourself accountable is key. Measuring your progress (see the following section) is one way to do that.

You can also hold yourself accountable by making your goals, expectations and action plans known to other people you trust, like your coaches, parents, or close teammates — your support network. Then they can help hold you accountable by inquiring about your progress. For more on support networks, see the sidebar entitled “Enlisting a support network.”

Celebrating your achievements

It is so important that you celebrate the achievement of your goals, no matter how small or tiny. The author of *Tiny Habits*, BJ Fogg, discusses how he celebrated flossing one tooth when he was having a difficult time with motivation. He literally described how he danced and sang when he accomplished this very tiny goal. We are taught to criticize ourselves harshly when we do not reach our goals and that is not helpful. What is extremely beneficial, however, is creating the habit of celebrating small and tiny successes. It creates such powerfully positive and motivating mindsets.



REMEMBER

ENLISTING A SUPPORT NETWORK

A good support network is worth its weight in gold. A support network:

- Ensures accountability
- Keeps your ego in check
- Surrounds you with friends when things aren't going your way
- Allows you access to diverse opinions

Make sure that you build a support network to help you along the path of achieving your goals. Your support network should include a diverse group of four or five people, and could be made up of friends, family, current and former coaches, partners or spouses, medical doctors, chiropractors, nutritionists, sports psychologists, or teachers. The key is to enlist people whose values are similar to yours and whose support you'll need along the way. Be sure to include at least one person who's comfortable being controversial and contrary — you need someone who can tell you no from time to time.

No one accomplishes their goals and reaches high levels of success on their own.

Measuring your goals

How will you know when you've achieved your goals? That may seem like a simple question, but it isn't always. Goals need to be measurable. For example, you can easily measure a goal such as "I want to lead the team in tackles this season," but it's more difficult to measure a goal such as "I want to improve my confidence."

For every goal you set, you need a method of measurement. That way, when someone asks you whether you've achieved your goal for the season (or, better yet, when you ask *yourself* whether you've achieved your goal), you'll be able to answer yes or no and have the data to back it up.

If you don't measure your goals, you're plodding along a path without any course or direction in your journey. When you measure your progress, you get to see and feel success, make adjustments, and enable yourself to reach your goals more efficiently.



REMEMBER

Don't limit yourself to goals that are easily measurable. You can set mental goals and measure your progress just as well. Throughout this book, we suggest rating yourself on a scale of 1 to 5, and tracking your progress in a performance journal throughout the season. You can read more about this in Parts 2 and 3.



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We frequently establish “mental and emotional statistics” for our athletes. For example, after every practice or game, athletes can rate their levels of confidence, motivation, effort, positive attitude, and ability to handle pressure. Athletes who track and monitor their mental progress on a consistent basis simply get better faster!

Todd has developed two different journals and adapted at times the journals to working with teams and helped coaches and athletes create their own “mental stat” sheets for after practices and games. In these journals or individual mental stat sheets, Todd has players rate on a scale of 1–5 mental and emotional stats such as “Confidence” and “Poise” and “Attitude” and “Effort.” He also then creates a small space to jot additional more specific notes, but each sheet is only one page and when placed in a journal format, easily fits in a player’s athletic bag. It is simple and straight-forward to complete and only take a couple of minutes, but it makes certain that athletes and coaches are reminded to rate themselves on the mental stats in the journal that all athletes need to be aware, and then many times some specific ones to an individual athlete or team.

The athletes who journal get better at a faster rate and therefore perform better more quickly. This also makes the process more fun and also allows for you to compete at higher levels if you so desire.

Giving yourself permission to adjust your goals

Think of your goals as living, breathing organisms — they can change as needed. Occasionally, you’ll set a goal and then go out and achieve it sooner than you anticipated, or you may encounter obstacles (such as injuries or bad weather) that force you to adjust your goals.

Successful athletes adjust their goals when they need to, and they don’t apologize for it. They realize that they aren’t perfect and that life and the season or off-season can be unpredictable. You need flexibility, not rigidity. Athletes who have rigid muscles do not perform as well, just as athletes with rigid mindsets do not accomplish their goals as quickly or as frequently.



REMEMBER

Adjusting your goals doesn’t mean you’ve failed — it just means you’re changing the course slightly or changing the timeline. Although having to adjust your goals can be frustrating, it’s a natural part of success in athletics and life.

Realizing that perfection doesn't exist

As you move along the path of achieving your goals that you set out for yourself, it is important to understand that perfection isn't something you should be striving for. After all, it doesn't, and won't ever, exist! Humans are imperfect beings, and they make mistakes, wrong choices, and fail to achieve their goals on a daily basis. Don't even entertain the idea that you can achieve perfection in your goal-setting program. As stated, you will need to make some adjustments along the way and that is to be expected! Make sure you allow space for the ups and downs along the path to your ultimate dreams and goals. Allow space for failure, which is part of the process, and allow space for adjustments. Do your best to banish the idea of perfection from your mind, since it is something that you can't achieve anyway.

Athletes who do accept and even expect failure and mistakes at times are the ones who maintain higher levels of motivation in the long-term. How many times do people give up immediately after failing? Thinking about New Year's resolutions. Many people set goals to get in shape and lose weight. Once they go off their diets or miss the gym a couple of times, they give up. They stop going to the gym or start eating sweets and other unhealthy foods. This is part of the reason that gyms are crowded in January and February and then become almost empty by April — people give up because they tried to be too perfect in achieving their goals.

SIDESTEPPIING COMMON GOAL-SETTING MISTAKES

Goal setting isn't easy. In fact, we've seen many athletes make the same mistakes when setting goals. Following are some of the most common mistakes — avoid them when you set your own goals:

- **Setting too many goals:** Athletes and coaches tend to set far too many goals, which results in their accomplishing none of them. All the goals you set may be motivating, and make sense, but too many at one time confuses the brain and diffuses energy. Instead, pick the goals that are most important or relevant for you and tackle them one at a time. Try to master one goal and then move on to the next one — instead of trying to accomplish four or five things at the same time.
- **Failing to set process goals:** Setting outcome goals is fun. You want to win the conference championship, hit a certain batting average, achieve a number of assists or goals, or obtain a college scholarship. Outcome goals go straight to our hearts and excite us! The next challenge is thinking about the *process* of how to make those goals become a reality. What will you have to do to make sure you give

yourself the best chance of reaching those outcomes goals? Most athletes stop short of this, setting process goals because the task feels too overwhelming or too confusing. Just remember that if you don't put your primary focus on your process goals, your desired outcomes won't happen.

- **Leaving your goals in a drawer:** Many athletes spent a lot of time before the season setting both outcome and process goals. Some teams even take a one- or two-day team field trip just to focus on the goal-setting process. As the season gets going, however, these goals seem to fade to the background. As athletes and coaches get caught up in the day-to-day grind, they lose focus on their goals and why they want to accomplish them. Goals need to be living, breathing parts of your team mission. You need to tend to them, monitor them, and adjust them throughout the season. Remember to revisit your goals at least once a week, so you don't lose sight of what you're working so hard for. Consider displaying your goals where you'll see them each day, such as on a bulletin board, on the wall in front of your desk, in your locker, and so on.
- **Focusing too much on ego and not enough on mastery:** When we discuss *ego goals*, we're referring to outcome goals, like winning. *Mastery goals*, on the other hand, are about improving skill and performance, regardless of the outcome. You can easily get wrapped up into thinking too much about ego goals and not enough about mastery goals. When you focus on the process of skill mastery and continual improvement, you're always getting better — even if it might not produce the win. You're still improving quantifiably and being successful. And when you're successful in this way, the wins will follow!
- **Expecting perfection:** As mentioned, many athletes expect perfection in reaching goals and when they do not reach this perfection (and they never will), they give up and are hyper critical of themselves. This leads to a loss of motivation. You need to accept that you will make mistakes and then decide that you won't give up when you do so. This is part of the process. Failing teaches you more about yourself and success and helps you build mental toughness and resilience — two other very important mental qualities we discuss throughout the book.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Discovering the truth about motivation
- » Identifying the different types of motivation
- » Pinpointing your current level of motivation
- » Increasing your motivation
- » Sidestepping pitfalls on the journey to greater motivation

Chapter 4

Stoking the Fire in Your Belly: How to Fan the Flames of Motivation

Motivation is one of the most important and most frequently discussed topics in athletics. Coaches and parents wonder why athletes aren't as motivated as they'd like, and athletes see their own motivation fall and wonder why. In this chapter, we explore the ins and outs of motivation.

We start by debunking some common myths about motivation — sometimes you get a better sense of what something *is* by finding out what it *isn't*. Then we introduce you to the two types of motivation: internal and external. We help you assess your current level of motivation. (Motivation levels aren't static — they rise and fall over time.) Then we give you some specific strategies for increasing your motivation and warn you about some situations that can wreak havoc on your motivation.

Throughout your athletic career, your motivation will change. But one thing can remain constant: your ability to measure your motivation, increase it when you need to, and respond to the situations that make your motivation wane.

Debunking Common Myths about Motivation

Motivation has been studied and discussed for decades, but myths about motivation persist. In this section, we fill you in on some of the most common of these myths and explain why they're just not true. When you know what motivation is and isn't, you'll be better able to reach your full potential as an athlete, using motivation as a tool.

You can get your motivation from other people

There is only one type of “true” motivation and that’s the motivation that comes from within. Other people and experiences can motivate you in a variety of ways, but sustainable motivation will ultimately come from within. *Self-motivation* — your motivation and the choices you make that flow from that motivation — is completely up to you and within your control.

Many coaches and athletes look to sports psychologists to be outside motivators for teams — they see providing motivation as the primary responsibility of a sports psychologist. Many athletes believe that their coaches need to motivate them — and if they don't feel motivated, they blame their poor performance on the coach. The reality is that no one is responsible for motivating an athlete except the athlete.



REMEMBER

People and experiences can assist you in motivating yourself. But you're responsible for your own motivation, and you have complete control over how motivated you are.

Fame and fortune are great motivators

Fame and fortune — what more could you want, right? These factors can definitely influence your motivation, but if motivation were as simple as fame and fortune, everyone would be motivated to be rich and famous and every rich and famous athlete would be motivated to perform their best all the time.

Think about yourself: Are you getting rich and famous playing your sport right now? Chances are, you aren't. Even if you're a pro athlete, you may not be making tons of money — for example, a typical rookie player in Major League Soccer may earn only \$40,000 per year. If you're still in school, you're playing for free, and even if you're a famous college athlete, when you first started out, nobody but your parents knew your name.

Fame and fortune can be motivating factors in sports (just as they are in other areas of life for most people), but they're never enough to sustain you to achieve and work hard all year. You need an internal passion that takes over in order for your long-term motivation to last.

Think about the unhappy rich and famous athletes you've read about. Research indicates that there isn't a huge difference in life satisfaction between people who make \$50,000 a year and those who make over \$1 million a year. When you achieve a certain level of money and fame, more money and more fame aren't going to do anything more for you. The best athletes don't play for financial security — they play for the love of the game.

Along with fame and fortune, external motivators such as these only take you so far. You will not be motivated long-term if you are trying to please your parents, seek the approval of your coaches, or attend a certain college because others think it is a great school. Ultimately, motivation comes from *within* for the long haul. Other external factors can motivate you on a short-term basis, but research shows that this sort of motivation is short-lived. If you want to be your best in a certain sport, it ultimately has to come from within.



We work with athletes all of the time who have the ability to compete at a Division I level, many times at some of the top schools in the country. It is easy for these athletes to get caught up in this process and choose a school because it is famous and/or they hear from parents, coaches, and teammates that they should attend this school. All the while, the athlete may not even want to compete at the college level. Or, they might just want to compete at a smaller, Division III school and have more balance in their lives. We see athletes all of the time who are motivated to choose a school based on external factors and what others think. But it almost never works out. They end up miserable in their sport and school, not performing and sometimes sitting on the sidelines for all four years. Or they end up transferring, which is another significant stressor. Make sure you make the decision to play sports at the collegiate level, or any level, based on your own internal motivations rather than the motivations of those around you.

Motivation alone can lead to success

Although motivation is critical to long-term success, by itself it isn't enough to make you successful. Numerous other attributes — including talent, fitness, discipline, knowledge, hard work, a support system, financial resources, and quality coaching — are important for success.

Talk to any coach and you'll hear about players who could have achieved so much more success if only they had been more motivated. At the same time, these same coaches can name players who are highly motivated but just aren't talented enough to perform as well as they'd like.

Defining Motivation

There are two types of motivation: internal and external. In this section, we explain the two types of motivation and tell you which type is best for your long-term success.

Understanding the two types of motivation: Internal and external

Internal motivation is associated with participating in sports for the joy and satisfaction of it. You play because you love the game and you love competing.

The flip side of internal motivation is external motivation, where your participation in athletics is driven by outside rewards — for example, the praise you get from your parents, or a potential scholarship offer to a prestigious school. You may not enjoy the activity for its own sake — you're more driven to compete by outside, external factors.



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There is also a third type of motivation called *amotivation*, which is simply the lack of motivation to participate in sports at all. There's nothing wrong with feeling amotivated. In fact, most athletes have, at one time or another, experienced periods when they lost all motivation to play. Usually, amotivation is associated with burnout and exhaustion. If you've tried to participate in certain sports and found that you simply don't like them and lack motivation for them, you're better off finding what *does* motivate you — another sport or a non-sport activity — and pursuing that instead.

We cover internal and external motivation in greater detail in the following sections.

Internal motivation

Internal motivation is the type of motivation you need for sustained long-term success in athletics. It's characterized by the following:

- » Enjoyment of the sport
- » Enjoyment of practice and training for the sport
- » A love of mastering technical aspects of the sport
- » Enjoyment of competition
- » The ability to maintain motivation despite adverse conditions

If you want to compete at higher levels — or if you want to be highly competitive at *any* level — you need to love the process of competing. It has to be inherently rewarding on some level, or you won't be willing to put the time, energy, dedication, effort, and resources into it.

There are times when you may lack motivation and enjoyment. This is normal and to be expected as part of sport participation. Nobody sustains their highest motivation levels all the time.

Also, it is important to note that some athletes do love their sport, but have a harder time when it comes to competing at a high level. They simply are not motivated to compete — they enjoy the process of getting better more than competing at the highest levels. That is okay as well. If you do not enjoy competing, then simply enjoy practicing and getting better at your sport. If you are afraid of competing, however, that may be a different story and something you could work on with a good sports psychologist.



REMEMBER

The top athletes in the world have high levels of internal motivation. They compete with themselves more than they compete with other athletes, and they want to be the best at what they do.

External motivation

External motivation is associated with outside rewards and benefits. Common characteristics of external motivation include the following:

- » Participation in your sport for rewards, such as praise, fame, and trophies
- » Peaks and valleys in motivation
- » The need for greater or better rewards to sustain motivation
- » The need for varied sources of external motivation in order to sustain motivation

External rewards can be motivating — there's no doubt about it. In fact, many coaches and parents use external rewards as a focusing strategy and reward system for young athletes, and that strategy is perfectly okay as long as it's not overused.

If you're engaging in sports for the *sole* reasons of getting a scholarship, to keep your parents happy, or for other outside rewards, such as stroking your ego or getting paid for an appearance as a college student-athlete, you'll find that your motivation is difficult to maintain over the long haul. Don't get trapped by external rewards — follow the path in your heart and listen to what your gut is telling you.



There is a place for external motivators, but they need to be used to *supplement* existing internal motivation and love of the sport. Otherwise, they lose their effectiveness.

Identifying which type of motivation is better

Most people think that internal motivation is the only type that matters, but the reality is, both types of motivation — internal and external — have benefits. If you want to maximize your motivation, use both: Start by participating in sports because you enjoy it. Choose a sport that you love and have some talent for. Then, when you need to, use external rewards to supplement your efforts.

Knowing your own personal motivations

There are many high school and college student-athletes whose motivation drops at times because they have so many responsibilities and commitments. For example, there are classes, travel, early morning workouts, time away from school, mental training, trying to have a social life, limited sleep — no wonder motivation is dropping. They are simply tired! It is not because you do not enjoy competing in your sport, it is more because your energy is being sapped by these other things.



Internal motivation is more important for your long-term success. External motivation can be effective in the short term — and it can be a *part* of your long-term success, but only if internal motivation is already present.

Assessing and Understanding Your Current Motivation Level

You can't improve your motivation unless you have a way of measuring where your motivation is currently and understanding why it is where it is. In this section, we give you the tools you need to assess your current motivation level, and give you some reasons your motivation level may be lower than you'd like.

Measuring your motivation

Measure and track your motivation over time by logging it in a performance journal. After every practice, simply assign a number from 1 to 5 (with 1 being low and 5 being high) to your level of motivation. If you notice many 4s and 5s, you're experiencing high levels of motivation. If you notice many 1s and 2s, your motivation is waning.



REMEMBER

If your motivation drops, that isn't a *bad* thing — in fact, it's a part of life. It is, however, a signal to stop, figure out why your motivation is waning, and address the causes.

You can also ask your coaches and teammates if they've noticed any drop in your motivation during practice and competition. Try to take to heart their opinions, and keep in mind that they want what's best for you.

Making sense of your motivation

If you're consistently rating your motivation with 1s or 2s, you want to figure out why you're lacking in motivation. Start by considering your love of the sport. How much do you really enjoy your sport — not just hanging out with your teammates or making your parents proud, but actually playing the sport itself? Be honest with yourself.

If you really love your sport, you enjoy working hard to get better, and you want to play at higher levels, you're probably internally motivated.



REMEMBER

On the other hand, if you're really doing it just to be part of the team or just to please your parents or coaches, and you don't really enjoy the sport itself, you'll be better off in the long run if you find an activity — another sport or a non-sport activity — that you're really passionate about.

If you have a high level of internal motivation and you're currently experiencing a drop in motivation, you need to explore potential causes, such as the following:

- » **Physical fatigue:** You may be physically tired or just plain exhausted. Participating in sports requires tremendous physical exertion on a daily basis for most of the year. If you're run down, and your muscles and body are tired, that drop in energy can be the cause of your dwindling motivation. If you're in the middle of the season, try taking a day off; in the off-season, take off even more time. Give your body a chance to rest, and you may find your motivation increasing.
- » **Underperforming:** Maybe your motivation is high or relatively high, but you are not getting the results you desire or expect. This is a good time to seek out others' perspectives to get feedback and learn possible ways to try something new or different.
- » **Lack of sleep:** Are you getting enough sleep? Believe it or not, something as simple as a lack of sleep can cause decreased motivation and performance. Keep track of how many hours of sleep you're getting each night and see how that corresponds to your motivation. You may find that you need a solid eight or nine hours to maintain the high motivation you're after.
- » **Diet:** Are you eating right to fuel your body and mind for the exertion your sport requires? Changes in diet, especially an increase in fatty or sugar-filled foods, can dramatically affect mental alertness and motivation levels.
- » **Overall health:** If you're sick — whether with a cold or flu, or because you're iron deficient or experiencing some other ailment — your motivation can decrease. If you're sure you're eating right and getting enough rest, and you've ruled out the other possible causes of waning motivation, make an appointment with your doctor for a checkup.
- » **Confidence:** Maybe you're experiencing a crisis of confidence — you're struggling in your belief to perform certain parts of your sport. If so, accept that state of mind, and go back to basics where you can begin to develop confidence in yourself again. Start with very finite and specific skills — this strategy can build confidence, which, in turn, will increase motivation. (For more on confidence in sports, turn to Chapter 5.)
- » **Burnout:** Because sports typically are year-round and athletes are specializing in one sport earlier in their lives and playing that one sport exclusively, it's natural for them to become bored and disenchanted occasionally. It may be time for you to get away from your sport, even just for a few days. Try playing another sport for a few days — run if you're a swimmer, swim if you're a runner, shoot hoops if you're a tennis player, play golf if you're a basketball player, and so on. Just getting some time away from your sport can help increase your motivation. (For more information on combating burnout, see "When you're burned out," later in this chapter.)

You may be experiencing a drop in motivation for some other reason. Maybe you aren't improving as you'd hoped. Maybe you aren't getting the playing time you want. Maybe your team is losing and the whole team is down. Or maybe you have a poor relationship with your coach. The solution to all these issues is to acknowledge them and then assess what you do and don't have control over, focusing on what you can control and setting aside what you can't.



TIP

If you can't pinpoint the cause of your lack of motivation, you may want to meet with a sports psychologist to explore potential causes.

Building an effective motivation plan

To build your own motivation, you need a plan. And to come up with a plan, you need to take a little time to figure out where your motivation currently sits. To do this, take some time and ponder the following questions:

- » Why do you play this sport? (Love of the game? Love of competing? You are good at it?)
- » If you play because you love the sport, at what level is your "love"? (1-10, with 1 being low and 10 being high.)
- » If you are playing because of something other than love of the game, is this a reason that will continue in the coming years?
- » What are some internal things you can do or think about to motivate yourself and move your love of the game and motivation levels higher on your 1-10 scale?

Maximizing Your Motivation: How Small Sparks Can Become Bonfires

Motivation is a complex mix of multiple issues, so you'll be addressing and adjusting it throughout your career. In this section, we give you some strategies for improving your motivation — you can pick and choose different strategies at different times, and see what works best for you.

Being completely honest with yourself

One of the most frightening but motivating tasks you can undertake is to be honest with yourself about your current level of motivation, why *you* are playing sports, what *your* goals are for your sport, how good you actually are, what skills need improvement, your mental toughness, areas in which you simply are not that good, and so on. Being completely honest may be painful, but motivation always increases when you clear away the excuses.



TIP

Don't limit the honesty to a conversation you have with yourself. Consult people you trust, and ask them to provide you with honest feedback. This feedback will help you understand your current athletic state and motivate you to improve.

Thinking about why you play the game

Throughout the season, revisit your reasons for participating in your sport. The season can be long, and it's natural to wonder why you're putting yourself through the physical and mental challenges. Many sports these days are year-round, making it even more important to assess your motivation levels.



TIP

Get to the core of why you're playing your sport. Is it to win a championship? To set a record? To be the best you can be? Then, when you know why you're playing, stay strongly connected to that purpose, especially when things are difficult. Remind yourself of this purpose every day. Some athletes post photographs of significant people in their lockers. Others tape up inspirational quotes.

Being curious and non-judgmental

Curiosity is a wonderful mindset that can help you maintain your motivation levels in sports. Being curious means looking at your sport participation like a child would — asking questions (How can this help me? How can I get better today? What can I do to help my team this week?) and looking for powerful answers. Sports these days tend to be major commitments and they seldom have off-seasons. This means it is very important to avoid overtraining, overthinking, overanalyzing, and burning yourself out motivation-wise. Being curious helps you keep the right mindset. When you ask yourself powerful, motivating questions, you'll get powerful, motivating answers!

Another mindset to cultivate is that of being non-judgmental. This means not being so hard on yourself for your mistakes and failures. (We cover this more extensively in Chapter 12, where we discuss the tool of mindfulness!) It also means trying to avoid the trap of comparing yourself to others and always looking for negatives in your game. Try to keep a non-judgmental mindset, and you'll be happier and more motivated in the long run.

Focusing on tasks, not ego

Sports psychologists like to talk about task orientation and ego orientation. If you're focused on the tasks of getting better — on those things over which you have control — your motivation will grow. Task orientation is common among people who have high internal motivation. Ego orientation, on the other hand, is more focused on the external rewards of competing, such as winning, money, success, fame, and media exposure. Most professional athletes have a combination of both ego and task orientation, with a greater emphasis on task orientation.



TIP

If you're struggling with motivation, ask yourself whether you're too focused on your ego fulfillment and not enough on the tasks of getting better and building your skill set in your sport.

As an athlete, you'll feel more motivated when you're confident in your skill set and believe in your ability to continue to improve. And you'll feel more motivated to practice and compete when you're performing well or when you feel confident in your athletic skills and potential. This confidence occurs regardless of whether you receive any external rewards, such as praise from your coaches or parents.



REMEMBER

You'll feel more motivated when you're concentrating on aspects of competition within your control. What you do have control over — your attitude, your preparation, how much and how well you practice, your lifestyle decisions — determines how well you do. By keeping your focus on these things, you'll improve and, in turn, you'll maximize your motivation.

Remember also that accomplishing small tasks — which we discuss in Chapter 3 — can be very motivating. At times, training for 3–6 months can feel like a long time and your motivation may wax and wane. However, if you focus on accomplishing tiny, “baby” steps today, your motivation and confidence grow. Go inch-by-inch and eventually you will go a mile.

Finding ways to experience success

When you're successful, your motivation will typically go up. So, make sure to put yourself in situations where you can be successful. For example, if you're in a slump, work with your coach and break down complex skills into simple tasks. You can achieve success with these simple tasks, which will motivate you to get better. Focus on tiny process goals that you can accomplish right now, even in the next few minutes. For example, you may run a mile, spend 15 minutes on visualization, or spend 5 minutes studying the playbook.

Mixing up your training

Variety adds spice and energy to your training. Change your workouts and practice routines from time to time to keep your motivation up. Every sport involves some repetition, but you don't have to practice in the same way, or at the same pace and time every day. Working on a variety of practice drills can shake things up and keep you from getting bored and losing motivation.

Think about mind-skill training as well. Many times athletes focus solely on physical training skills. As an example, we frequently discuss with golfers the best way to train. They never hit 20 balls in a row, consecutively, during a game. Golfers do this on the range all of the time, however. Instead, we encourage our golfers to hit one ball, going through their pre-shot routine and assessing the shot from a skill and mental standpoint. We would rather a golfer hit 20 balls in 45 minutes and do so as they actually would do in tournament play. This is mind-skill training and helps to mix up training and make it better. If practice is better, you will be better. If your practice is deliberate and focused, you will get even better. Now that is motivating!



TIP

Seek and find the new trends in physical and skills training in your sport. For example, more athletes are participating in yoga for better flexibility and mind control. There are also many new neuro- and biofeedback devices to help track mental training.

Surrounding yourself with highly motivated people

If you're surrounded by others who are driven and achievement oriented, you'll pick up their energy and it'll buoy your confidence and motivation. These people are like the wind, helping to power your confidence sailboat.



WARNING

On the other hand, if you're around athletes and coaches who are content at just competing and not succeeding, get away from them as quickly as possible — they'll sap your energy and motivation.

Being disciplined

With discipline comes freedom, so you need to discipline yourself to establish effective habits. Even though you may not feel like engaging in certain athletic tasks every day, your discipline will take over and build motivation. The goal is to establish strong, effective sports-related habits, and to make them subconscious and automatic. These habits require less mental effort the more you engage in them.

Seeking support

Surround yourself with emotionally supportive people who understand how hard sports participation can be. Express your thoughts and feelings to them — having people to talk to will lift the weight off your shoulders, allowing your motivation to return.

Sports psychologists are great at this because they're objective and supportive and allow athletes to vent and get things off their chest in a safe and supportive environment.

Moving on from your mistakes

You will experience failure and make mistakes in sports and in life. The best athletes in the world experience loss and imperfection every day. The key is to have a short memory when it comes to these failures. Learn from them, and then let them go. Nothing comes from obsessing about past mistakes except lower motivation levels and confidence. (For more on bouncing back from mistakes, turn to Chapter 11.)

Thinking positive

Thinking positive is a great way to raise motivation, which is why we devote an entire chapter to positive self-talk (see Chapter 8). Make sure that you're training your brain to respond positively in the face of adversity or failure.



REMEMBER

No matter how bad something may seem, something good can always come out of it. Sometimes our greatest learning comes from mistakes and failure.

Overcoming Obstacles to Staying Motivated

Many challenging situations can get in the way of motivation. In fact, it's easier to *lose* your motivation than it is to maintain it. So, you need to be aware of these roadblocks and know how to address them when they come up. In this section, we lead the way.

When your role on the team has changed

Whether you're a high school athlete, a college athlete, or in the pros, your role on your team will change sometimes. Your coach may change you to a different position where they feel you'll be a bigger help to the team. Another player may come along and take your starting role. Or you may be traded to another team. Regardless of the reason, when your role on the team changes, staying motivated can be a challenge.



TIP

Stay focused on what you have control over. No matter what your role on the team is, focus on mastering the technical aspects of the sport. Even if you don't get playing time, you can stay motivated in practice by focusing on improving your performance. Make sure you're always ready to perform your best — you never know when you'll be called on to play another role on the team. This is where internal motivation comes into play as well.

Talk with the coach about your concerns regarding your change in role. Don't go into this conversation with any expectations; keep an open mind. Listen to their reasons for making the change.



REMEMBER

You may not agree with the coach, but they make the decisions and you have to respect that fact while you're a member of the team.

When you're burned out

Burnout is one of the more common experiences among athletes today. Athletes are burning out earlier than ever before, and every year many athletes leave their sports as a result of burnout.



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Why do athletes burn out?

- » **They're expected to play sports year-round — there is no off-season.** Young athletes especially are not mentally or physically equipped to handle such demanding schedules.
- » **Athletes are specializing in one sport younger than ever.** As a result, they play their sport year-round, without letting up, which takes a toll on their motivation.
- » **The physical training in sports has become much more demanding and rigorous.** You're training longer and harder, and these physical demands weigh down not only your muscles, but your mental and emotional energy, as well as your motivation.



To stave off burnout, take care of your physical body with adequate diet and sleep. Getting enough rest and proper nutrition can have a strong influence on your emotional energy levels.

Take time off from your sport when you can. If it's during your off-season, you can afford to take more time off, maybe even a couple of weeks. The world won't end if you take some time off.

Give your mind and heart “rests” as well, through meditation, imagery, or breathing practice. Take naps! Naps can be one of the best ways to refresh your mind, body, and motivation.



When burnout is knocking at the door, reach out to people you can trust — a family member, a friend, a mentor, or a sports psychologist. These people can help you get things out of your head and off your chest so that your motivation can return to its normal levels.

When you're being pulled in different directions

If your life is out of balance, your motivation levels will be drained.



You aren't just an athlete — you're a person. And you have other aspects of your life that can be stressful, in addition to sports. When your emotional and physical energy resources are being drained by other things in your life outside of sports (like relationships, school, or financial difficulties), you won't have enough energy for your athletic training. When you're being pulled in many different directions, especially in a day and age where athletic competition is extremely demanding, your motivation can drop — not because you don't love your sport, but because you have a finite amount of energy.



To keep your motivation going strong when you have lots of outside commitments requiring your time and attention:

- » **Make sure to take care of the physical basics: sleep and nutrition.** Stress drains energy, including motivation, and you need to replenish your body and mind often.
- » **Build strong coping skills.** There are always going to be stressors in your life, but the most important thing is to have the tools to cope with them. The more tools you have, the less energy drain will occur and the less impact on your motivation level. We discuss mental health issues in Chapter 13.



REMEMBER

You can use the various skills we cover in this book (imagery, confidence building, goal setting, focus, bouncing back from mistakes, and so on) to cope better with life off the playing field as well. Don't limit their use to sports alone.

- » **Talk to a sports psychologist about the reasons why your life is out of balance.** They can help you get it back.
- » **Focus on task management.** Your life may be out of balance because you're overextended and not managing your time and priorities well. If you can get a handle on your schedule, you can prevent decreases in motivation that come with feeling overwhelmed. (For more on task management, turn to Chapter 9.)

When you're not seeing eye to eye with your coaches and teammates

Conflict with your coaches or teammates can drain your motivation. In fact, many athletes have left their teams or sports because of this kind of conflict.

The key is to realize that conflicts with coaches and teammates are part of the athletic experience. You just need to address any conflicts as quickly and as effectively as possible, to minimize their impact on your motivation.



REMEMBER

You don't have control over your teammates and coaches, but you do have control over your own attitude and how you handle your relationships with them.

Here are some tips to keep in mind when dealing with relationship conflicts:



TIP

- » **If there is a conflict, address it as soon as possible.** Holding onto anger, resentment, and bitterness, or simply being confused about why the conflict exists, drains your physical and mental energy and depletes your motivation.
- » **Keep your focus on your own attitude and what you want to communicate.** Differences in opinions and personality styles are part of life. Focus on getting better as an athlete, and those conflicts won't hurt your motivation.
- » **Try to understand the other person's point of view first.** You already know where you're coming from — if you understand how the other person feels, you'll be closer to resolving the conflict and moving on.
- » **When you're in conflict with a coach, remember that you're ultimately in a one-down position.** The coach is the final judge and jury. Convey your opinion, but keep in mind that the coach's opinion takes priority.

- » **Try not to take anything personally.** Although not taking things personally may seem impossible, you can do it. You may not like the behaviors or decisions of a coach or teammate, but you can choose to take it personally or to see it as unrelated to who you are as a person.
- » **Consider the fit of the coach and/or team.** You may have to consider whether there are too many differences to remain on the team, at that school, or playing under that coach. Try to address your differences before you walk away. But if you're going to face a constant drain on your motivation by playing on this team under this coach, leaving may be the best choice.

When your priorities in life change

Your motivation will naturally ebb and flow over time, but if you notice that your motivation is dropping because of a lack of interest or because you're developing different priorities, pay attention.

If you're losing interest in your sport or you've developed an interest in another sport or another non-sport activity, keep in mind that this happens to athletes all the time. Just make sure that that your lack of interest or shift in interest is the true reason for your decline in motivation, and that some other issue — such as a lack of confidence, a conflict with a coach, or some other outside factor — isn't to blame. If you do have a lack of interest, talk to your parents, coaches, or other people you trust about what you're thinking and going through. This way, you'll be able to sort out your thinking more clearly and make a more informed decision.

For many athletes, admitting to a drop in interest in their sport or simply a greater interest in something else is extremely difficult. Especially if you've played your sport for a long time, much of your identity is tied to yourself as an athlete.



TIP

Admitting to your parents and coaches that you don't want to play your sport can be painful. You may find it helpful to talk with a sports psychologist — alone and/or with your parents. A sports psychologist can explain to your parents that goals change — and for good reasons. They can tell your parents that they can expect discipline, hard work, integrity, and commitment from you, but that expecting you to want to continue playing a sport you don't enjoy is unfair. Having the support of a good sports psychologist can help you make this transition more smoothly.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Knowing what confidence can do for you
- » Understanding what confidence is (and what it isn't)
- » Recognizing that confidence begets more confidence
- » Taking your confidence up a notch
- » Avoiding the roadblocks to confidence

Chapter 5

Swagger: The Art and Science of Building Real Confidence

Lack of confidence is a common obstacle in many athletes' competitive lives. Confidence is also one of those concepts that many people talk about but few understand. Your parents probably told you, "Be confident!" or "Think like a winner to be a winner!" But, if you're like most people, you discovered that positive thinking can only get you so far. And if thinking positive doesn't get you the results you're after, it's easy to be frustrated.

The thing is, your parents weren't entirely wrong. Positive thinking is one piece of the puzzle — it's just not the entire puzzle. In this chapter, we give you *all* the tools you need to build and maintain confidence as an athlete. But we start by telling you why confidence matters.

Understanding What Confidence Is and Why It Matters

What is confidence? When it comes to athletics, we define it as the belief that you have a skill set related to your sport that helps you be successful in that sport. When you're confident, you believe that you can get the job done. Confidence is a nonrenewable resource — in other words, you have to be building confidence constantly, to buffer yourself from the harsh world of competitive sports. Even the best athletes experience the peaks and valleys of confidence throughout their careers. Where the best athletes differ from the rest is that they work to limit those peaks and valleys and level the landscape, which allows them to perform better.

Another important aspect of confidence — or a way to view confidence — is as a byproduct of success. It is important to realize that you perform better when you're confident, but that confidence is also a *byproduct* of success. The key is knowing how to define success. Sure, you can define success as going 4/4 at the plate, scoring the go-ahead goal, or winning the game, but success is also defined in the small steps and processes you engage in *today* to get better.

For example, when you engage full effort and focus in practice — that step builds confidence. When you practice and make 50 three-footers in a row on the practice green, that action builds confidence. When you work for 60 minutes and achieve the first serve percentage you wanted, that action builds confidence. Make sense? You can see how you achieve success in these small processes, and then the byproduct is confidence. What we are trying to say is that you do not have to wait for a win to gain confidence — you simply engage to the best of your ability each day on the small tasks, and confidence will come!



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We often see athletes who want to build their confidence, and they're surprised to learn that they can build confidence in many other ways, many of which don't require our direct help. Sports psychology work can play a key role, especially when your confidence is low and you're out of solutions to build it up again, but other factors can assist in building confidence. For example, if a golfer is lacking confidence in their wedge, the best way to increase their confidence might be for them to hit 500 wedges in order to further develop their skills. When a basketball player lacks confidence in their endurance, they need to get more fit as a way to raise their confidence. If your lack of confidence has its root in your fitness or skills training, start there. Then, if you're still not satisfied with your confidence, and after you've tackled all the physical aspects, consider working with a sports psychologist.

Confidence plays a big part in how often you win. In fact, it's one of the single most important ingredients to your success as an athlete. Sure, talent and preparation are important, but they go nowhere without confidence. Confidence is the fuel for your athletic success — it powers you and affects every other facet of competing. Always remember though that confidence creates success and is *also* a byproduct of success, however you define success.



REMEMBER

Your opponent is battling their own self-doubts, insecurities, and weaknesses. Plus, they are battling against you and your confidence levels. Your opponent is constantly evaluating you and your confidence against their own. The higher your confidence is, the less likely it is for your opponent's confidence to remain high.

You need to stay on top of your confidence, not only for your own game, but for your opponent's game as well. The higher you can keep your confidence, the more difficult it is for your opponent to match that level of confidence.

Debunking Myths about Confidence: Don't Believe Everything You See or Hear

You've probably heard some myths about confidence, such as the following:

- » You just have to believe in yourself.
- » If you believe it, you can achieve it.
- » Positive thinking is the secret to a good life.
- » Either you're confident, or you aren't. There's no middle ground.
- » If you stay positive and always look on the bright side, you'll become more confident.
- » It's important to be confident — just don't be *too* confident or people won't like you.

Any of these sound familiar? These myths often do more harm than good when it comes to building confidence. For instance, if it is as simple as believing in yourself, why does anyone that believes in themselves ever fail? And does that mean that anyone, as long as they just believe in themselves, can become an NBA or NFL star?

What do you believe about confidence? How has your environment contributed to your confidence? Analyze your conscious and subconscious beliefs about confidence, and consider the impact those beliefs are having on your athletic performance. When you do that, you can move ahead and learn how to build real, lasting confidence.



TIP

Think about confidence on a continuum, from low to high. Sometimes, your confidence will be through the roof; other times, not so much. Confidence isn't a static trait — it fluctuates. You can always improve and change your confidence level. The key is to develop habits that allow you to consistently feel confident at the level you need to perform and get better in your sport.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONFIDENCE AND COCKINESS

Many people have trouble differentiating between what real confidence is and what cockiness looks like. They're afraid to get more confident, because they're worried that other people will think they're cocky. Here's the difference:

Confidence	Cockiness
You feel good about yourself.	You don't feel good, but you pretend to.
You're open to feedback.	You're afraid to get feedback.
You believe in your skills.	You doubt your skills.
You love to compete.	You shrink from true competition.
You don't need to brag.	You feel the need to brag about how good you are.
You're strong.	You're insecure.
You manage rejection.	You fear rejection.
Mistakes roll off your back.	Mistakes stick in your head and you overthink.
You don't think when performing.	You overthink when performing.

Cockiness is not a confidence overload — instead, it's a genuine *lack* of confidence! Athletes who are cocky feel so fragile in their confidence that they try to mask it (to avoid detection) by putting on a "tough" front. They're hoping that this front will allow them to slip by, unnoticed. The problem is, the facade falls apart when they come up against another athlete who's truly confident. Truly confident athletes have prepared better and expect to perform well during competition.



REMEMBER

You can increase your confidence. No matter what happens in your athletic career or life, you can *always* improve your confidence. Be confident about that! It takes practice, just like anything. We all need to practice our skill and fitness, so why would we not have to practice our confidence? This is where we miss. We say, “be confident,” but how are we supposed to do something without practice? No worthwhile coach would expect you to be ready for the season without practice and conditioning, so why do they expect you to be more confident when you have not practiced confidence?

Tapping into the Confidence Cycle

The confidence cycle (shown in Figure 5-1) starts with a belief that you can do something. Let’s say your belief is “I can win the starting job as quarterback.” The next step is to go out and try to win the job. Work your butt off. Take chances and risks when appropriate. Every once in a while — hopefully, more often than not! — you’ll succeed. Success may mean having a great practice — being in sync with your receivers, and hearing from your coach how nice your passes looked. Your risks are rewarded as your skills increase, which buoys your confidence, causing you to think, “I can do this! I’m going to try even harder tomorrow!” and so on.

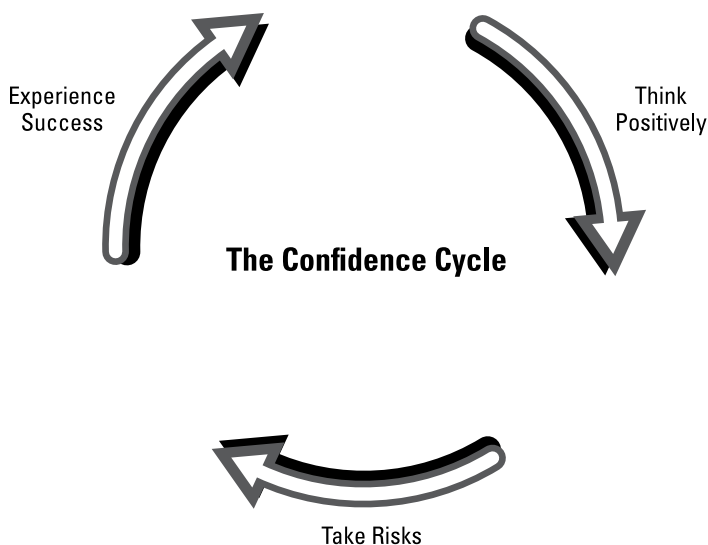


FIGURE 5-1:
The confidence
cycle.

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You think positively, take the risks you need to achieve your goal, experience success, and then think even *more* positively. Success begets confident thinking, which begets more success. You think positively, take risks, and get rewarded. The development of confidence depends on the ability to take risks in a graduated, successive manner until you experience some rewards. When practicing confidence, you are willing to get better in some act that will make you better — even the smallest of acts — and look what happens — not only do you feel good, but others around you notice and give you praise, which always feels good and builds confidence.

In the following sections, we cover the three phases of the confidence cycle.

Thinking positively

To start, you need to believe that whatever you're pursuing is worth the effort, worth the pain, and worth the rewards that may come later. This is where the notion of positive thinking can be helpful. Positive thinking is characterized by optimistic, future-oriented, and solution-focused thoughts, like the following:

- » I can do this!
- » I'm determined to make this work!
- » I'm willing to put the time in to be the best!
- » I will do whatever it takes!

You may be thinking, “But how can I say these things when I don’t believe them?” or “I haven’t had success, so how can I believe these things?” It doesn’t matter. You can still train yourself to think positive in order to get the cycle started.

Notice that these statements have nothing to do with outcome — they have to do with process. You can do all these things because they’re within your control. The outcomes that you desire might not happen every time, but you can still gain confidence by starting to think positive about the process. And make the processes small — then you will be successful and your confidence will rise!



TIP

Try using affirmations to improve your positive thinking. Positive affirmations have the following three *P* qualities:

- » **Present tense:** The first component of a positive affirmation is a focus on the present. You say, “I can do this,” not “I will be able to do this.”

- » **Positive focus:** The second component of a positive affirmation is a positive focus. Say what you want, not what you don't want. For example, "My swing is smooth and powerful," not "I won't screw up my swing."
- » **Particular behavior:** The final component of a positive affirmation is a focus on one particular behavior, such as "I fight to the end, no matter the situation."

Write down positive affirmations for different situations pertaining to your sport. A golfer might make a positive affirmation about their tee shots, short putts, long putts, bunker play, getting up and down, approach shots, chips, and flop shots. Get as specific as you can, and write an affirmation for every situation you can think of. Keep an ongoing journal of these affirmations and always keep your journal with you or write them in your smart phone. These affirmations are great ways to build confidence — we show you more about these steps in later chapters.

Here are some examples of positive affirmations that meet all three of the criteria listed earlier:

- » I am (present tense) one of the best defenders in the conference (positive focus). My hands are quick (specific) like lightning, and I make big defensive plays every game.
- » I am (present tense) money in the 50 free (specific). I am known for my explosiveness in the water. I blast off like a rocket and swim as fast as I can (positive focus).

Taking risks

The next phase, after you're thinking positive, is to take appropriate risks. That means shooting more, driving to the hoop more, stepping in with the first team squad more, and being more aggressive on defense. These are all risks that you take to try to gain the associated rewards. Athletes typically perform much better when they're excited and on the offensive than when they are fearful and on the "defensive."



REMEMBER

This is about taking *appropriate* risks — risks that fit into your everyday practice and have good consequences. Inappropriate risks — like shooting the ball every time you get it or playing so aggressively that you're out of control — don't get you anywhere.

GIVING YOURSELF PERMISSION TO SWAGGER

You can't feel confident in any aspect of your athletic performance if you haven't first given yourself permission to feel confident. You have to get out of your own way. As long as you work hard and control the aspects of athletic participation that you can control (such as attitude, practice, curiosity, learning, and effort, for example), you have every right to feel confident! When you realize that, you give yourself permission to swagger, or display your newfound confidence to the world. Swagger is the behavioral consequence of having a healthy level of confidence in yourself and your abilities as an athlete. It's that air about you that tells others that you expect great things from yourself, and that you expect to win every time you compete.

Your confidence is about you and you alone. Just because others may not have the same level of confidence doesn't mean you should be ashamed to show your skills in the heat of the battle. Many other athletes lack confidence, but that's not your problem. Get better right now in something — confidence comes!

Taking appropriate risks requires courage. Many athletes play it safe — they may do many things well, but their success will always be limited. Successful athletes are willing to take risks. Sometimes these risks pay off and other times they don't, but these athletes are the ones who will eventually have more success and, therefore, more confidence.



REMEMBER

It takes courage to pursue risks, and it takes risks to build confidence. Every athlete has fear, but not every athlete has courage.

Experiencing success

The third phase of the confidence cycle is the easiest but sometimes most elusive part of the equation, because it relies solely on your doing the first two steps well. Frequently, arriving at this step can take the longest, because success tends to come on its own schedule.



REMEMBER

Hard work doesn't ensure success and new skills, but it does increase the *likelihood* that you'll experience it eventually.

Success breeds confidence, but be careful with how you define *success*. You may have tremendous confidence in certain skills, but you may not have been doing it long enough to win or you may not have developed certain aspects of your sport to be successful consistently. For example, a tennis player may have tremendous

confidence in their serve, but they may still not have as much success as they could because they lack abilities in their ground strokes.

Success does wonders for your confidence. When you play with confidence, your true abilities and potential are put on display. When a player on tour wins their first tournament, it isn't uncommon for them to win or come close to winning more tournaments in the several weeks following that first big win. Why? Because their thinking improves, they start taking better risks, and they experience success. They become supremely confident.

Building Your Confidence

Confidence is like most other things in life: It requires effort and practice. You can't be confident if you haven't changed your thinking and taken some calculated risks. Confidence is largely dependent on work ethic — the harder you're willing to *work* at being confident, the more likely you are to *be* confident. The smarter you work assists in building confidence too. When you practice building confidence habits that are both hard and smart, watch what happens!



REMEMBER

Confidence ebbs and flows, but you always have control over the process for improving your confidence. Even the best athletes in the world struggle with confidence sometimes, so you're totally normal if you do the same. The key is to keep working at building and earning your confidence. And in this section, we show you how.



WARNING

The confidence that we discuss in this chapter is about how you feel about your abilities in your sport. We've worked with many athletes over the years who have a lot of confidence in their athletic abilities, but who lack confidence in other areas of their lives. Often, these athletes have tremendous ability and may be among the best in their sports, but they can't see it because of their low *overall* confidence. If you're suffering from a lack of confidence in *all* areas of your life, not just in your sport, address this issue with a sports psychologist or another mental health professional. If your overall confidence is low, it can limit the specific confidence you develop in your athletic endeavors.

Focusing on day-to-day success

Building your confidence takes time, so you need to keep your focus on the small, incremental changes over time. Your confidence will grow every time you take a risk that pays off, but you have to be patient and allow that process to unfold. Again, just like your skills and fitness, confidence building and the art of building a mindset of confidence both take practice.



TIP

Think of building your confidence as a long-term investment. Legendary investor Warren Buffett doesn't get upset when the market has a string of bad days, a bad month, or a bad year. He takes a long-term perspective right at the outset. In fact, he has said, "My favorite holding time [for stocks] is forever." The NFL's Tom Brady did not get drafted high as a young player, but look at what he has accomplished! Slow and steady gains win the day. If you take this same view when you're building your training around increasing your confidence, you won't fall victim to despair and frustration.

There is a real power to building your confidence one day, and one small victory, at a time. It's about progress, not perfection. You won't feel confident all the time, and not every risk you take will pay off. But focus on the success you *have* had, and you'll build confidence over time. If you give too much power and weight to the mistakes, your confidence will suffer.



REMEMBER

Pay close attention to your small successes. Every journal entry you write after competition or practice should begin with what you did well. Even if it was a terrible game or practice overall, you did *something* well, and that's what you want to start with. Eventually, you'll see that you're doing something well every single day, and your confidence will increase.

Concentrating on process, not outcomes

A crucial step to becoming more confident is to switch your focus from what you're trying to achieve (the outcome, or increased confidence) to how you go about trying to achieve it (the process, or your training habits).

In sports psychology lingo, we call this "controlling the controllables," which simply means taking responsibility for those things that are under your direct control at all times: your thoughts, your feelings, and your behaviors. You need to think in ways that are productive and optimistic, no matter what's going on around you. When you're doing that, you'll feel in control of yourself and, ultimately, more confident. If it were that easy, we would all do it and there would be no reason to write this book. It takes time and effort.

You can't control outcomes, but you can control the process. If you allow your confidence to be dictated by outcomes, you're at the mercy of circumstances beyond your control. Think about it: You may play really well and still lose the race, game, or match — or you may play poorly and win. Winning doesn't always equate to success and losing doesn't mean failure.

TRACKING YOUR CONFIDENCE OVER TIME

A simple method for tracking your confidence, and one that can easily be implemented into your training plan, is to use a 5-point scale, with 1 being the low end and 5 being the high end. For example:

1. No confidence
2. Minimal confidence
3. Moderate confidence
4. Good confidence
5. Supreme confidence

Using this simple scale, rate yourself at the end of every practice and competition. Track it on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis, using averages if needed. This will allow you to keep your metaphorical finger on the pulse of your confidence levels.

You should also track your confidence in more specific areas as well, such as with mind, body, and skill. You can assess and track your confidence on a more general scale, and you should also track specific areas within your sport. For example, if you are a volleyball player, you may have a confidence level of 4-5 on your hits down the line, but a level of 2-3 in knowing the playbook. If you are a baseball player, you may have high confidence (4-5) in the field but lower confidence level (1-2) at the plate. A hockey player may assess their confidence in several areas — speed, endurance, leg strength, ability to take a hit, knowing the playbook, communication, leadership, handling the puck, and shooting. You can get as specific as you want. Make the tracking system work for you.

After you've tracked your confidence levels, you can readily adjust and modify your training plan accordingly. For example, if you notice that your confidence level for the last two weeks has been averaging a 3, and your typical monthly average is a 4, then you need to make some adjustments in order to improve your confidence in your sport. Maybe you need to modify technical aspects of your training or change your strategy. Maybe you need to have a pep talk with your coach or mentor. Or maybe you need a refresher session with a sports psychologist.

When you track your confidence, you have the peace of mind that comes from knowing that all your hard work can and will pay off.

Another great addition to your journaling after games and practice is to highlight three great things you did. They do not have to be anything world-record setting, but if they help you feel good about yourself and your performance, write them down! This is another great way to “practice” confidence.

Check out the following lists of things you can control and things you can't:

Controllables	Uncontrollables
Attitude	Weather
Diet	Wins
Sleep	Losses
Amount of practice	Coaches' decisions
Mental training	What other people think, say, or do



TIP

A good way to measure whether you're controlling the controllables is to use feelings like frustration as alarms or red flags. You'll feel frustrated many times when you're focusing on things that are *outside* your control and influence.



TIP

You want to have a *mastery focus* instead of an *ego focus*. Stay focused on mastering *tasks* or *processes* in your sport — these tasks are the day-by-day building blocks that keep your confidence moving in the right direction. Your confidence may not improve every day, but you'll continue getting better. For example, when golfers make changes in their swings, they often go through periods of higher scores. So, during these times, they have to stay focused on mastering the individual changes involved in that swing. If they focus on the fact that they're taking the steps to master the swing basics that will eventually lead to lower scores, they'll be able to maintain and build their confidence. On the other hand, if they maintain an ego focus (where they're more concerned with winning or losing), their confidence will go up and down more than a roller coaster on a busy weekend. In order for confidence to grow consistently, mastery focus is the answer.

It has been said many times by many people, "If you can get 1 percent better today, just think where you will be in three months! One year! Five years!"

Tackling the Obstacles That Get in the Way of Confidence

Half the battle in improving your confidence is getting past the obstacles that try to sabotage the confidence you *do* have. Like all athletes, you'll come across your share of obstacles. In this section, we cover some of the most common ones and tell you how to move past them, confidence intact.



REMEMBER

It's not what happens to you that matters — it's how you respond.

When you have a bad game

Everybody has a bad game from time to time — it's part of competing. Many competitors, however, have trouble allowing for bad games in their training. They think bad games should never happen, and that they can somehow prevent them. The problem is, bad games are inevitable, so when these athletes are faced with one, they fight themselves the entire way. They simply don't allow space in their lives for bad performances.

A better way to approach this obstacle is to *anticipate* occasions in which you won't be on top of your game. Assume that it *will* happen from time to time. We tell our athletes to rate their games on an academic scale — giving themselves an A for their best performance, a B for above-average performances, a C for average performances, and so on. Every now and then (hopefully, not too often), you'll get an F on a test. Maybe you didn't study hard enough for the test, or you were sick, or you studied the wrong material. It happens. The same is true with sports. When you're used to grading your performances, you see that you're not always failing — sometimes you actually get As and Bs. This helps you cope with the occasional lousy performance, because you know it's not the norm. Remember, progress, not perfection.

When you haven't anticipated ever having a bad game, but you find yourself in the midst of one, you can cope. Here's how:

- » **Change your strategy.** For example, if you're a tennis player, and your normally killer backhand has deserted you, you may need to rely on your forehand or aggressiveness instead. If you're a basketball player and your jumper isn't falling, you may need to go in for the layup or pass to your teammates.
- » **Focus on the one or two things you *are* still doing well.** This will allow you to at least salvage something from the game and build on it for next time.
- » **Change your mindset.** If you reframe the situation (which is that you're having an "F" game), you can allow yourself to take more risks, try new things, change up your pace, and so on. The usual way isn't getting the job done, so why not try a new mindset and approach? It's not like it can make things much worse! For example, a soccer player might think they may not have had their best touch, but that they worked their butt off and was aggressive the whole game.



REMEMBER

Sports are about consistency, not perfection. Consistency wins championships. You're going to fail, but that's part of being human! You may feel disappointed or angry after a poor performance, but you don't have to let that feeling reduce your confidence. Confidence is like the foundation of a home: When it's solid, it doesn't crumble and waver when a storm blows through. Windows may break, shingles

may be torn off the roof, and trees may be knocked over, but the foundation remains. In the same way, if you have a solid core of skills and strong preparation habits, your occasional losses or poor performances won't affect your confidence.

When you're not getting playing time

When your coach isn't putting you in the game, it's easy for your confidence to take a hit. You can't control whether your coach plays you. But you can control your attitude and perspective. You can look at not getting playing time as a sign that you need to work harder or work smarter. Focus on the process *today* that will make you better — something you have control over and something that also builds confidence. You do not have control over coaching opinions or decisions.



REMEMBER

Coaches are notorious for changing their minds. The player who's starting today may not be starting tomorrow. What this means is that you have an opportunity. Make sure your mind and body are ready to go if that opportunity arises.

If you focus on your lack of playing time (an outcome over which you have no control), you're allowing your confidence to be dictated by another person's opinion. Your coach may have a very good reason for starting someone else instead of you, and they may be justified in their decision, but you have to keep your focus on getting better and improving.



REMEMBER

No one can take away your confidence without your permission.

When you aren't getting playing time, talk with your coaches. Tell them, "In your eyes, what do I need to do better in order to give myself more opportunities to compete?" This way, you're taking ownership of something over which you have control — your performance and preparation. By keeping your focus on building your skills and getting better, you're automatically going to raise your confidence level. We can't guarantee that that will translate into more playing time, but your confidence *will* grow, which ultimately will translate into better performance — whether you play or not. As a note, coaches many times do not like to hear about wanting more playing time. You do not even need to bring it up. Simply be curious about what you can do better to compete more. You know and your coaches know that you want more playing time.

When you're sick or injured

Get used to playing sick. The sports world doesn't stop for sick athletes. Colds, the flu, aches, muscle strains — you name it, they happen, and usually at the worst possible time. In cases like this, your best bet is to start by gauging how sick or injured you are.



WARNING

You should sit it out if:

- » You're putting yourself at risk of further injury by competing.
- » You'll be a detriment to your team by competing.

When you're sick, you need to pay special attention to energy management (see Chapter 12) and be sure to pace yourself. When your body is fighting off illness, it has less energy available to help you fight your opponent, so you won't be able to go as long at your usual pace. You may need to change your strategy — for example, letting your opponent do more of the work or tire themselves out. Accommodate your reduced level of energy if you want to stay competitive while sick.

And of course, you need to be considerate about not passing along communicable diseases, like COVID-19. If you are feeling sick with flu-like symptoms, you may need to work it out and work through it, but also be smart about making sure you are not putting your teammates, coaches, and others at risk.



TIP

When you're working through an injury, especially one that doesn't allow you to participate in practice or training, it's easy to suffer a loss in confidence. But you can maintain your confidence, regardless of your ability to compete. Here's how:

- » **Develop an imagery plan.** Even though you may not be able to execute certain physical parts of the game because of your injury, you can still see the images of yourself performing in your mind. Imagery can help maintain your confidence as you recover. (See Chapter 7 for the complete lowdown on imagery.)
- » **Study the game.** Anytime you can't compete, you can still learn more about the game by reading, studying, and/or watching film. Use your downtime in the most effective way possible. Ask questions, talk to coaches, and study the game from different views and angles. These activities will help you maintain your confidence level, because you're improving, just in a different way than usual. Go to practices and games! This is a great way to study the game from a different perspective. We realize that sometimes it is hard to be around the team when you cannot compete, but do not throw away this golden opportunity. You could even become a "temporary" coach — talk about learning the game!
- » **Stay fit.** Be sure to eat well, sleep as much as you can, and do whatever rehabilitation strategies and exercises are permitted. For example, if you hurt your shoulder, you may still be able to get in the pool and walk or get on a stationary bike.

» **Work on training your mind.** When you have time away from your sport because of an injury, this is a great opportunity to train your mind. In addition to the imagery program, which is very important especially if your injury is going to keep you out for several weeks or more, practice all of the skills covered in this book. For example, make a point to cover one of the mental tools in this book once per week. You can even practice these tools while watching your team practice. Watch YouTube videos and listen to podcasts to help with your mental training as well.

When you aren't as prepared as you could be

Lack of preparation usually has a detrimental impact on confidence. The less prepared you are, the less confidence you'll have. Preparation strongly builds confidence, and the good news is, it's something completely under your control. If you aren't prepared and your confidence level is low as a result, you know you didn't do your job and you have only yourself to blame.

Sure, coaches sometimes share in the responsibility for how well their players are prepared, but your performance and your skills are your responsibility to develop, and that development comes through hard work and discipline. These factors are under your control — always.

Some of the common reasons for lack of preparation include

- » Laziness
- » Lack of discipline
- » Lack of motivation
- » Not knowing how to prepare
- » Poor task management (see Chapter 9)
- » Poor lifestyle decisions (for example, not getting enough sleep or proper nutrition)
- » Resentment or anger toward other players or coaches



REMEMBER

No matter the reason for your lack of preparation, your choices are what make the difference in your athletic life. If you want to be great, solid preparation is essential.

Preparation takes place in five different areas:

- » **Physical:** You must prepare your body by eating right, getting enough sleep, hydrating yourself, and making sure you're as fit as possible.
- » **Skills:** You need to prepare from a skills standpoint, executing and practicing your athletic skills over and over.
- » **Strategy:** You must know the game plan so that all you have to do is execute your skills. This comes from working with the coach, watching films, studying plays, and listening or paying attention.
- » **Mental:** You must get yourself in the right mindset to compete to the best of your ability. This means getting focused on executing your game plan, making sure you review your strategies and routines (see Chapter 10), and managing your self-talk (see Chapter 8).
- » **Balance:** You have to prepare by getting all the other things in your life in balance, so that they don't interfere with your athletic performance. For example, if you have a test the day after a practice or game and you're worried because you haven't studied, then you didn't prepare for the game or practice as well as you could have.



REMEMBER

Preparation isn't just about your sport — it's about taking care of all your responsibilities so you can focus on your sport in practices and games.

The more prepared you are in *all* these areas, the more confident you'll be.

When you are feeling pessimistic and negative

Sometimes it is just plain difficult to stay positive about things, especially in sports. Maybe you faced a string of solid competitors or teams, or you had some bad breaks or luck, or you just aren't executing your game plan like you wanted to. In times like these, it can be particularly hard to stay positive.

Another reason that it can be really difficult to stay positive is because our brains are naturally wired to be negative! This is an evolutionary mechanism passed down through the generations in our DNA. So, it really isn't your fault! This mechanism in your brain focuses on aspects of life that are threatening and can cause us emotional or physical pain. In early forms of life, it was beneficial to feel fear — it would keep a person alive to be on the lookout for a hungry tiger wanting a yummy human meal. But in sports, there are no hungry tigers walking around.

For example, have you ever noticed that the idea of something scary (like wrestling the state champion) seems so much worse than it is in real life? This is because your brain tries to “protect” you by pointing out and noticing all the things that can do wrong, and many of these possibilities include pain or injury.

The problem with this tendency of our brains to focus on the negative aspects of competing is that, if we don’t monitor it, it will automatically run the show. As a competitor and athlete, it is important to have a plan for dealing with the negativity that pops up in your brain. This way, you can counterbalance that negativity and allow yourself to feel more confident.



Your Mental Toolkit for Success

IN THIS PART . . .

Develop ways to improve your focus in sports

Learn the process for improving your visualization and imagery skills

Practice new and more positive forms of self-talk

Develop routines that help prepare you for practice and competition

Learn powerful tools to better handle pressure in sports

Practice ways to bounce back more quickly after mistakes

Learn techniques for being more present, calm, and mindful in sports and in life

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding how focus affects performance
- » Using the different types of focus to your advantage
- » Maximizing focus under pressure
- » Being present in the moment
- » Identifying what stands in the way of focus
- » Taking your focusing skills up a notch

Chapter 6

Tool #1: Mastering the Art of Focus

The ability to focus is among the most important traits you can have as an athlete. The best athletes in the world are masters of focus — they can tune out everything that doesn't matter, focus only on what does, and perform well under pressure. Focus is a skill like any other, which means you can learn it and get better at it with practice. In this chapter, we explain what focus is and how it affects your athletic performance. We explain the different zones of focus — you can't maintain intense focus for an entire game, competition, or performance, but you can move between the zones of focus and use them to your advantage. We show you how you can reduce or eliminate the pressure you feel in competition and be in the moment when you're on the field. Finally, we explain some of the roadblocks to focus and tell you how you can take your own focus to the next level.



Sports psychologists make a distinction between focus and concentration. You can think of concentration as being broad in nature, whereas focus is narrow. Concentration has a longer duration, while focus has a much shorter duration. Concentration is the target, and focus is the bull's-eye. For the purposes of this book, the distinction between concentration and focus isn't necessary, so we opt to use the term *focus*.

Understanding What Focus Is and Why It Matters

Focus is the ability to devote your full attention to the task at hand, tuning out distractions. This ability is, in many ways, one of the single most critical factors determining your athletic success.

Successful athletes (and successful people in general) are able to optimize their focus. Whether it's focusing on a big-picture level (such as improving their fitness or defensive skills over the duration of a season or off-season) or focusing on the immediate details (like improving footwork during practice) their level of focus is high.

In fact, one of the characteristics of successful athletes is their ability to focus intently during practice and competition. Top athletes in every sport pay attention to what matters (the task at hand) and ignore what doesn't (everything else). In fact, what you focus on when you're practicing and competing has a great deal to do with how successful you are. If you're focused on the task at hand (watching the baseball), then your performance (swinging the bat and connecting with the ball) will improve. If you're focused on other things (such as what you did your last time at bat, how good the pitcher's fastball is, the fight you had with your friend last night, or the grade you got on today's math test), your chances for success decrease.

Where your mind goes, your energy flows

Our brain is an amazing organ, with structures in place and electrical circuits (neuronal pathways) that come together in concert to form what we typically refer to as *the mind*. Think of the mind as the collective output of all of the complex parts of our biological organism known as the brain.

When we use our minds, it requires energy. To think about something, such as a goal you are striving for, you need to fire those certain pathways in the brain. To

do this, the brain requires electrical conductance of a signal down the neuron pathway. This is the biological basis of all thought. So, when you are thinking about one thing — a goal — you are putting energy into that pathway in your brain, and not into something else. When you think about things, your mind is putting energy into those pathways. The more you do this, the easier it is to do it again, biologically speaking. Thus, where your mind goes, your energy flows.

For example, when you spend time ruminating about mistakes you made in practice yesterday, your energy goes into obsessing about what you did wrong, how clumsy you are, why you always seem to screw things up, and so on. It takes energy that you could possibly be putting into the goal you ultimately want to achieve and wastes energy focusing on yesterday's mistakes at practice. Plus, when you ruminate on mistakes, you are firming up and strengthening the neural pathways to do it more. These types of pathways are not going to be beneficial to your athletic success.



It is very important that you understand and utilize the tools we give you in this book to manage your mind and thinking better so that you don't waste energy on negativity or things that you cannot control. Doing so will simply tire you out, both mentally and physically, and drain valuable energy that you could instead be putting into kicking butt in your sport!

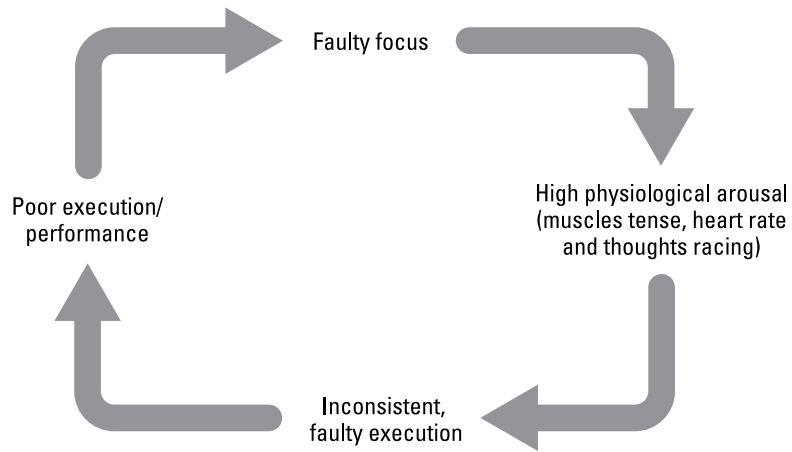
Limiting distractions and focusing

Distractions can be internal (negative or off-task thoughts) or external (like the noise of fans in the stands).

Your focus is also directly related to your arousal level, which affects your muscle control and, consequently, your performance. For example, if your mind is centered on your fears of striking out, you'll probably feel nervous and worried. These thoughts create muscle tightness, rapid heart rate, shallow breathing, and more unproductive thoughts — none of which is helpful to your performance.

On the other hand, if you're focused on what's necessary and relevant, your body will respond accordingly. For example, if you're a quarterback and your internal focus point is "relax and release," your body stays calm and relaxed and you're able to execute the skill of throwing an accurate pass. That doesn't mean the receiver will catch it, but it does mean that you're more likely to execute a good pass. On the other hand, if your focus point is in the future or past (such as worrying about the outcome of the game or remembering an interception you threw last quarter), your likelihood of executing in the moment decreases. Figure 6-1 illustrates this relationship.

FAULTY FOCUS CYCLE



EFFECTIVE FOCUS CYCLE

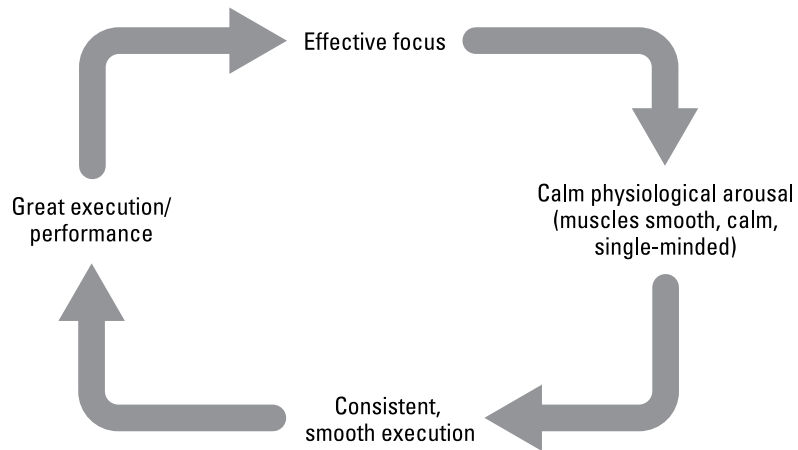


FIGURE 6-1:
The effects of
focus on
performance.

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ANATOMY 101

Different parts of your brain play different roles in helping you focus during competition. Your brain is made up of several lobes:

- **Frontal lobe:** Located on the front of your brain, the frontal lobe controls planning, decision making, and attention. The frontal lobe is also the area of the brain that controls emotions and behaviors.
- **Temporal lobes:** You have two temporal lobes, one on each side of your brain, located just above the ears. The temporal lobes are involved in memory, as well as your senses of smell and sound.
- **Parietal lobe:** Located on the top of the brain, just behind the frontal lobe, the parietal lobe controls broad sensation (touch) and narrow sensation (such as judging the weights of objects).
- **Occipital lobe:** The occipital lobe is in the far back of your brain. It's responsible for visual perception and color recognition.

Your brain also contains a cerebellum, which is located at the back and bottom of the brain. The cerebellum controls movement, coordination, and balance.

At the top of your spinal cord lies the brain stem, which is the area of the brain that controls the involuntary functions essential for living, such as breathing, arousal, heart rate, blood pressure, and digestion.

All these parts of your brain play a role in your ability to perform to the best of your athletic abilities. For example, to be a good basketball player, you first need to have good hand-eye coordination (cerebellum and frontal lobes). To have a good jump shot, you need to quickly be able to size up the distance to the rim (frontal, occipital, and parietal lobes). You'll also want to have a good memory for plays that coach will call (temporal lobes). Finally, in this fast-paced sport, you'll want to be able to gather information (via sight, touch, sound, and smell) and make decisions quickly on what to do with the ball (pass, shoot) while stopping, jumping, and then running up and down the court repeatedly. Every section of your brain works together in a symphony to enable you to do all these things quickly and efficiently.

It is important to remember that unproductive focus on things outside of our control (the past or future, other people, coaches, officials' calls, or college scholarship opportunities) drain your physical energy. You may have tons of skills, but if your body is tired because your worry and focus has been on unproductive things, you will not perform to your skill level. Unproductive focus — such as worrying about outcomes or what others think about you — drains immense amounts of energy, thus rendering you less able to perform. Not because of your skill level, but simply because your body is tired from worrying.

Knowing the Zones of Focus

To think big in sports — to have a goal of being number one in the league or winning the championship or being named an all-star — you have to learn to manage the small stuff. You do this by using the three zones of focus (shown in Figure 6-2) to your advantage:

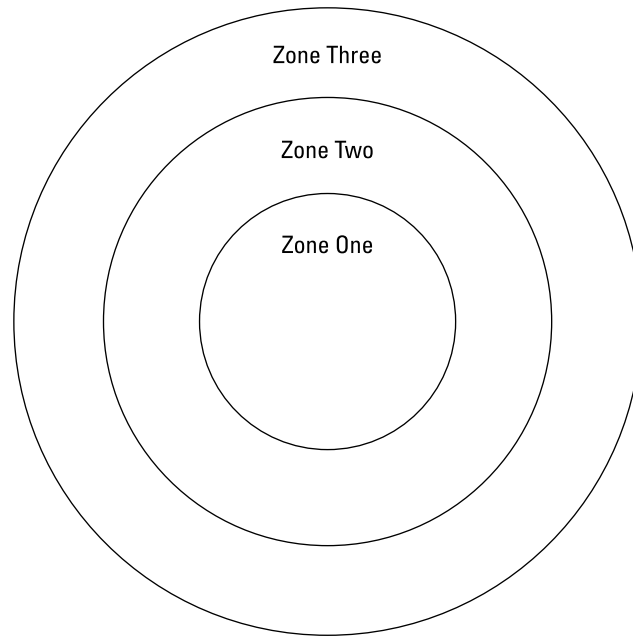
- » **Zone 1** is where you have your highest level of focus on the immediate task at hand. This is where your focus is laser-like. For example, a golfer teeing off or standing over a putt would need their focus to be Zone 1. More examples of Zone 1 focus include a quarterback or wide receiver ready to start the play, a tennis player ready to return serve, or a shortstop awaiting the swing of the bat.
- » **Zone 2** is a slightly lower degree of focus than Zone 1. This is where a golfer is standing near the ball, trying to figure out the wind and club selection, but they aren't yet standing over the ball ready to swing. More examples of Zone 2 focus include a soccer player being in the vicinity of the ball on the field, but without having the ball. When you're in Zone 2, you can allow your level of focus to drop a bit from Zone 1 because you're a step away from the immediate action.
- » **Zone 3** is the broadest level of focus, where the level of focus is even less intense. This is where a golfer is walking down the fairway to the ball. More examples of Zone 3 focus include a tennis player walking to the back of the court to towel off in between points or a goalie in the box while the ball is all the way at the other end of the field.



REMEMBER

Whether you're in Zone 1, Zone 2, or Zone 3, focus never ceases — it just changes in intensity. You can't stay in Zone 1 the entire time. If you tried to, your mind and body would be so taxed that you'd be exhausted and completely ineffective by the end of the competition. The good news is you don't *have* to stay in Zone 1 all the time — you can use the various zones of focus, moving in and out of the zones as required.

Zones of Focus



Zone One

Highest level of focus, most intense

Examples: Golfer standing over ball, tennis player right before serve, quarterback over center

Zone Two

Slightly less intense focus

Examples: Golfer sizing up shot, looking at distance, wind, club selection, quarterback and wide receiver in huddle

Zone Three

Still focused, but less

Examples: Football offense on bench, golfer walking in between shots, tennis player in between games

FIGURE 6-2:
The zones
of focus.

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Focusing on What Matters

Earlier in this chapter, we describe how what you focus on impacts your performance (see “Understanding What Focus Is and Why It Matters”). When your mind is focused on the right things, your body responds by performing in the ways it knows how — the way you practiced over and over. But when your focus is on the

wrong things, your body responds with tightness and anxiety, which increases your chances for mistakes.

So, the key is knowing what to focus on. All the various things you could focus on can be divided into two categories: relevant and irrelevant.

Relevant points of focus

Relevant points of focus have a direct relationship to and impact on your performance. For example, a relevant point of focus for a softball pitcher might be pitch selection, relaxing the arm, or cue words. All these things are relevant because they influence the success of the pitch. Points of focus are relevant because you have control over them and because they impact your performance.

Here are some more relevant points of focus:

- » Your attitude
- » Your practice goals
- » Your fitness levels
- » Your rest and diet
- » Your mental preparation
- » Your knowledge of your sport
- » Your specific game plan
- » Your quality and amount of practice
- » Your study of game film
- » Your effort, focus, and discipline in practice

Irrelevant points of focus

Irrelevant points of focus are ones over which you have no control and that do not have any direct relationship to performance. For example, an irrelevant factor for a tennis player would be how many people are watching, the location of the tournament, or what the other coaches or media might think about them. These factors are irrelevant factors because they have nothing to do with performance. The tennis player will still have to execute the same technical skills whether they are in Europe or the United States. A serve is a serve and a forehand is a forehand, regardless of how many people are in the stands.

Here are some other irrelevant points of focus:

- » Your opponents' actions
- » Your teammates' actions
- » The venue
- » Your coach's decisions
- » The fans
- » The opinions of others



REMEMBER

If you don't have control over a factor, it is irrelevant, and you don't need to waste energy on it. You don't have any control over whether you win. You do have control over how you perform.

BROAD OR NARROW, EXTERNAL OR INTERNAL: TYPES OF FOCUS THAT MATTER



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Relevant points of focus can be broken down into four main areas, as outlined by Robert M. Nideffer in *The Inner Athlete*:

- **Broad and external:** Broad and external points of focus are all about assessing a situation. An example is a quarterback dropping back to pass and scanning the field. This is both broad (they are looking at the whole field) and external (they are looking outside of themselves at what's happening around them). Other examples: a golfer scanning the fairway off the tee, a volleyball player looking at the opposing team's setup, or a batter looking at the positions of the fielders.
- **Broad and internal:** Broad and internal focus is about coming up with all the pieces for a solid game plan. Having a broad and internal focus means you think about certain areas you need to improve in order to reach top athletic performance, such as your fitness, skill, or mental training. An example is a diver assessing their mental skills in competition. This is both broad (all their mental abilities when it comes to diving) and internal (they're things going on within herself). Other examples: a baseball pitcher formulating their game plan, a runner planning how they'll attack the course, or a lacrosse goalie assessing and evaluating their levels of focus in competition.
- **Narrow and external:** Narrow and external points of focus are outside of yourself, but smaller in size. An example is a softball player tracking the ball coming toward

(continued)

(continued)

the plate. This is both narrow (the ball is a small object) and external (it's coming toward them from the mound). Other examples: a lacrosse goalie tracking the ball, a golfer addressing the ball, or a rifle shooter zeroing in on the target.

- **Narrow and internal:** Narrow and internal points of focus are small, minute details within yourself. An example is a runner focusing on their breathing tempo. This is both narrow (they are focusing on their breathing, which is a small part of their overall performance) and internal (they are looking at themselves, not at anything around them). Other examples: a skeet shooter focusing on their neck and shoulder tension, a soccer player taking a deep breath before a penalty shot to relax their legs, or a tennis player relaxing their arm before a serve.

The points of focus vary from one sport to another, but these four elements of focus are a part of all sports. Break down your sport into these four areas so that you know exactly what's relevant to great execution in *your* sport. The better you know these focus points, the better you can be at focusing on them, and the better your performance will be. You can practice zeroing in on these points of focus using imagery or journaling.

ZEROING IN ON THE PRESENT

The present moment is the single most important moment you have as a competitor. Research shows that when athletes are having a great performance, they're focused solely on the present moment. They aren't thinking about the past or the future. If you're thinking about the past or the future as you compete, you're wasting mental energy on details that are irrelevant to your performance. What you did last week or last game — good or bad — doesn't matter. If you focus on the past or the future, you're distracting yourself from the present moment and decreasing your focus, opening the door for potential mistakes. By not being in the moment, you automatically increase the chance for errors and decrease your chance for success.

An important key about staying in the present moment is that it is a skill that needs to be practiced. All the tools we discuss in this book need to be practiced in order to be mastered. If you want to become more present, you must practice. If you want to be more focused, you must practice. Just like your skills need practiced, your mind needs practice too. For example, if you want to increase your running endurance and practice, one time per month, that is how good you will become. If you practice once per week, that is how good you will become. But if you practice 5-6 days per week, that is how good you will become. Your focus and all of these mental skills are the same thing. They need to be practiced. Your mind is a muscle just like all other muscles in your body. They need to be worked if you want them to work for you.

So how do you stay in the present moment? Here are some helpful tips:

- **Practice staying in the present moment every day.** Set a goal to focus on the present moment in every practice. Listen to what your coaches say and the words that they are choosing to express their points. Focus only on the immediate execution of a technical skill for your sport, such as shooting a perfect free throw. Make sure you evaluate your ability in this area after practice. The more you make staying in the present moment a conscious practice, the better you'll get at doing it during competition.
- **Choose an object — a candle, a point on the wall, or even a piece of sports equipment like a ball — and stare at it for 30 seconds, without looking away or thinking of anything else.** Try to add more time to this practice each week, up to a minute. By just staring at an object and thinking only about only that object, you're in the present moment — you aren't thinking about what you did earlier in the day or about what you need to do later in the evening. This drill sounds simple, but many athletes find it difficult. Stick with it, and your ability to focus will improve.
- **Bring awareness to your internal state through a technique known as *centering*.** Pay attention to your breathing, your muscle tension, and how clear your head feels. Bring these physical and mental sensations to a balanced state — center yourself. You can also ground your feet so that your entire body feels centered and balanced.
- **Practice yoga.** Many athletes and teams practice yoga, not only for greater flexibility but also to train themselves to be more in the moment. The more you practice yoga, the better you get. Take a class at a gym or studio in your area. Suggest to your coaches that they bring a yoga instructor into practice once a week. Or, to work on yoga on your own, check out *Yoga For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, by Georg Feuerstein, PhD, and Larry Payne, PhD (Wiley).
- **Keep a present moment log.** You can practice being present off the field and, as a result, get better at this skill in your on-the-field performance. Simply make a commitment to trying to be more present in all your daily activities. At the end of the day, write in your present moment log about the various times during the day when you were successful at being more present.
- **Stop during practice and assess your focus.** We encourage coaches and athletes to simply stop at a good moment during practice — such as during a water break or when the coach stops play for a bit — and check in. How's your focus? Where is your focus? Is it where you need and want it to be?
- **Practice mindfulness skills.** In some ways, everything listed here has an element of mindfulness in it. We feel that mindfulness as a performance skill is so important that we have devoted a whole chapter to it (Chapter 12). Take a look at this chapter and gain even more skills to become more present. When you are present, your focus is more in line with where you need to be for great performance.

Using Focus to Reduce or Eliminate Pressure

You probably feel pressure in most practices and every competition. You may even assume that pressure is just part of playing sports. We have news for you: Pressure is a figment of your imagination. Yep, you read that right — pressure exists only in your mind.

Think about it: Situations are not pressure-filled in and of themselves. How you view those situations are what does or doesn't result in a feeling of pressure. And whether you feel pressure is directly related to what you focus on. For example, say it's the bottom of the ninth inning and you have the chance to hit a game-tying RBI. You may or may not feel pressure in this situation, depending on what you're thinking about. If you're focusing on possible outcomes — such as “What if I strike out?” — you'll probably feel pressure, have tightened muscles, and decrease your chances of getting that RBI, because tight muscles can't swing a bat as freely as loose muscles can. On the other hand, if you're thinking about the process of putting the ball in play — “Relax and hit it solid” — you won't feel pressure, your muscles will be looser, and you'll have a better chance of success.

This is why some athletes excel in situations that others feel are “packed with pressure” — the ones who feel all kinds of pressure aren't viewing the situation in the same way as the ones who don't. You must practice and prepare to have your focus where you want and need it to be. It does not just happen — it takes practice.

If you've ever felt an increased heart rate, tightened muscles, or knots in your stomach before a competition, you can bet you were focusing on irrelevant details that had nothing to do with performance. So which came first — the thoughts or the physical reaction? The negative thoughts actually *caused* the negative physical response — it's just easier to recognize a knot in your stomach than it is to monitor your thoughts. But here's the real kicker: When you start to have negative physical responses (like the rapid heart rate and the knot in your stomach), you'll be more likely to focus on those physical sensations even more, making the situation even worse.



TIP

The good news is, you can train your brain to focus on things that are effective and help you relax your body and improve performance. Here are some specific tips for keeping your focus where it needs to be during competitions

» **Focus on the process rather than the outcome.** For example, a golfer needs to focus on swinging smoothly (process), not on the fact that they have to make a birdie to win (outcome). When you focus on process, you create a

more positive, effective mindset and state of readiness for competition. Make sure you focus on how you're going to execute athletic tasks — and set aside everything else.

- » **Practice deep, slow breathing.** You can never go wrong with taking some deep breaths as a way to relax and get your focus back to where it needs to be. If you focus on managing your breathing, you'll relax your muscles and help to neutralize the physical effects of any negative thoughts. When your muscles and breathing are calm and relaxed, your mind will be as well. Then you can direct your focus back where it needs to be.
- » **Focus on what you can control.** Focusing on controllable factors reduces the amount of pressure you'll feel during competition. For example, you have direct control over your fitness level, your diet, how much you practice, and how hard. If you think about the things that are uncontrollable, however — such as winning, whether your coach pulls you from the game after a mistake, or how your teammates will view your performance — you'll create a negative and nervous state of mind, which will manifest itself in physical symptoms.
- » **Assess your focus after practice and games.** In your journal after games or in audio notes on your phone, take a few minutes to assess your focus during that competition or training session. If it was great, congratulate and celebrate! If it was not, take notes and try to identify what got in the way. Make a commitment to improve the next day.

Overcoming the Obstacles to Focus

If focusing were easy, we wouldn't need to devote an entire chapter to it. And the reason it isn't easy is because all kinds of things get in the way of focus. In this section, we fill you in on the biggest obstacles to focus, so that you can work to overcome them.

Thinking about outcomes

Thinking about outcomes is probably the greatest obstacle to focus in all of sports. You play sports because you want to win, but this focus point is one of the greatest causes of loss and poor performance.

At first glance, focusing on outcomes makes sense because it's how athletic success is typically measured — one team wins, one team loses. When you check out the box scores in your local paper, you see outcomes such as wins and losses. Box scores don't provide information on effort, strategy, or mental toughness. So,

when you're bombarded by the relentless focus on outcomes in sport every day, it's no wonder that you would do the same when competing.

You have to train yourself to focus on the process — the specific skills you're performing. When you focus on the process and not the outcome, you dramatically increase your chances for success. The process is what you have control over. You can play or compete your very best and still get beaten by a better opponent. You can also perform poorly and still eke out a win. If you focus on how you compete, the outcomes will take care of themselves.

Also, when people think about outcomes, they typically create stress and pressure. When we experience stress and pressure, we experience tight muscles, rapid heart rate, and shallow breathing. When our bodies are in this state, we cannot perform to our skill levels. You may have great skill, but you can't perform to your skill level because of the stress response. Why was your mind in that state? Because your mind was focused on outcomes. Training your mind to focus on processes is one of the most important yet challenging tasks. It works when you work on it!



TIP

Use cue words to get your focus where it needs to be. (Turn to Chapter 7 for more on cue words.)

Getting caught up overthinking and overanalyzing

In the sports psychology world, there is a common saying that you'll hear when someone is describing what happens when athletes try to think and play their sport at the same time: *Analysis paralysis*. This means that, once you get caught up trying to think your way through something while competing (for instance, obsessing over the potential win or loss or your strategy therein), you get "stuck" — your muscles tighten, your breathing gets shallow, and your reflexes get noticeably slower. This isn't a good thing!

It's important when competing in sports to recognize the negative consequences of overthinking and overanalyzing, as well as knowing when it's the appropriate time to think about things. After all, you don't want to not think at all, right? The key is to know when and where to do that.

When should you think? And when is it appropriate and helpful to use that mind of yours? Before or after competition, of course. Occasionally, it can also be helpful to stop and reset your thinking during stoppages in competition, but on the whole, the most effective times to think and analyze are when you *aren't* competing. Remember, there is no award called The Biggest Thinker award! Knowing *when* to think and analyze is an important part of being a better athlete and competitor.

When we hear our athletes (or any athletes for that matter) describe some of their greatest performances, they do not mention that they were thinking. Be an athlete when it comes to competing. Trust your training. If you are preparing in the correct manner — mind, body, and skill — you can just let go, have fun, and compete when it comes to game time. Let your body do what it knows how to do. Prepare and practice effectively and hard so you can simply let go, have fun, and be excited in the game!

Getting too emotional

Another frequent obstacle of focus is allowing yourself to become too emotional while competing. Note that what you are focusing on and thinking about is typically causing you to get too emotional. When your emotional arousal level gets too high, your concentration level drops. When you become too emotional, two major things occur:

- » **Your body changes in a negative way.** Your muscles tighten, your heart rate increases, and you have shallow breathing.
- » **Your focus becomes clouded.** You're thinking about being angry or nervous (or even excited and happy) instead of focusing on what it takes to perform well.

Most of the time, we are in our subconscious, meaning that we are unaware of what our mind is actually doing. You need to “consciously” train your subconscious to be what you want it to do and be. When you build and practice an ideal mindset, you can more easily let go and compete during games. You will trust this process more because you have prepared and trained it!



TIP

Here are some ways you can combat the tendency to become too emotional:

- » **Become more aware of your emotional arousal levels.** You need to know the warning signs that you're becoming too emotional, such as a faster heart rate, shakiness, jittery hands or legs, a knot in your stomach, racing thoughts, or muscle tightness. The earlier you can catch yourself, the easier it'll be for you to calm down.
- » **Manage your mistakes.** Write in your journal or think about how you'll handle situations in which you make a mistake. You need a strategy — if you get too emotional after making a mistake, and you don't have a strategy in place to help you when you do, you only increase the odds of making another mistake. (See Chapter 11 for more on bouncing back from adversity.)



REMEMBER

Your emotional reaction may be understandable, especially after a bad call or after you make a mistake, but you have to learn to stop it before it spirals out of control. You hurt your own performance as well as your team's chance for success if you don't.

- » **Walk away.** You may just need to cool down and step away when there's a break in the action, such as at the end of an inning or quarter. Step away and get your focus back to where it's effective.
- » **Practice relaxation.** Chapters 10 and 12 address some specific ways to relax. These skills are important ones to have in your mental toolbox. Sports are emotional events and experiences that require you to have not only the ability to pump yourself up but also the ability to calm yourself down.
- » **Practice all mental skills.** Anytime you give yourself practice and preparation of any of the skills in this book, you are going to be helping yourself manage your emotional state. All of these tools play a role. When we design mental practice plans for our athletes, they typically involve all of these tools, because they all help in different ways.

Letting off-the-field stuff get in the way

You're more than just an athlete — you have other things besides sports to address and manage in your everyday life. You have family relationships, friends, academics, a job, financial concerns, and other stressors. Each person's combination of stressors is unique, but all athletes must learn effective strategies for dealing with them.



TIP

Here are some ways to better manage your life outside of sports:

- » **Face your issues.** If you have off-the-field issues, make sure to face them and deal with them in the best way possible, as soon as possible. Dealing with stressful situations isn't easy, but if you continue to let these issues fester in your mind and body, they'll hinder your ability to focus on the field.
- » **Write it and leave it.** Write down all your off-the-field concerns before going to practice or competition. Then, after you write them down, make sure to leave them in your locker, in your car, or at home. They'll be there when you get back, but they can't help you bring your focus to athletics. When you leave practice or the game, you can put your full focus back on those other issues.
- » **Create consistent and solid practice and competition routines.** Routines help you to place your focus where it needs to be. They lock you in and help you focus on what's relevant at the time (your performance) and not on what's irrelevant (off-the-field stuff). (Turn to Chapter 10 for more on routines.)



REMEMBER

We're not saying that the off-field issues, like your family and schoolwork, aren't important — in many cases, they're far *more* important than sports. We're just saying that focusing on those other issues will only hurt your performance, which makes them irrelevant while you're on the field.

- » **Seek support.** If your concerns and challenges are taking over your life and you're having a hard time managing them, don't hesitate to seek support from friends, family, teammates, coaches, or a sports psychologist. Asking for help is a sign of strength, wisdom, and courage.
- » **Practice mental skills.** The same skills that help you perform better in your sport will assist you in managing life outside of sport. For example, if you are feeling stress in a relationship or overwhelmed by homework, you can use these same skills to help in those "performances" as well. Performance is performance, whether on or off the field.

Dealing with fans, officials, and coaches

How many times have you gotten upset and lost your focus after a bad call from an official? What about when a fan yells something at you? How about when your coach pulls you out of the game? All athletes experience these moments at some point in their athletic careers. Some athletes even get ejected or see a dramatic drop-off in performance because of their inability to deal with fans, officials, and coaches.



REMEMBER

You don't have any control over fans, officials, or coaches. And anything over which you have no control is irrelevant to your athletic performance. Continue reminding yourself of this fact throughout your career, especially because fans, officials, and coaches have a way of getting inside your head.

If you're having trouble ignoring fans, officials, and coaches, keep in mind the following:

- » **Identify what's relevant and what's irrelevant.** Fans, officials, and coaches are irrelevant to your athletic performance. Your athletic tasks and emotional arousal levels are relevant, and they're what you should focus on.
- » **Plan and visualize.** Write in your journal about the specific situations in which you've lost your focus. Come up with a plan for how a composed athlete would handle these situations, and then use imagery (see Chapter 7) to see yourself managing them in this productive way. Planning and visualizing will help you maintain your focus when those same situations arise in the future.

The loss of focus that athletes and coaches experience after a questionable call (even if the call is questionable only in their minds) happens daily in sports. In fact, many athletes and coaches get ejected because of their own inappropriate behavior after calls they haven't liked. What does this do for athletic performance? Absolutely nothing. Not only do you lose focus in that moment, but you may also experience a drop in concentration for the next few minutes, if not the remainder of the competition. We hear athletes say that the officials' poor calls caused their anger and loss of focus. Wrong! Their loss of focus was caused by their decision to pay attention to the official's call and not their performance.



TIP

If you see opponents getting upset at a call by an official, take advantage of their lack of focus. Put the ball immediately in play when your opponents are not focused. And make sure you don't give your opponents the same advantage over you.

Developing Tools and Habits for Improving Focus

You can improve your focus in a variety of ways, many of which we cover throughout this chapter. Remember that focus, like all of the other mental tools discussed in this book, must be practiced in order to be honed. Reading this book and then knowing the information does not translate to action and expertise. You must practice!

Here are some additional ways to improve your focus:

- » **Prepare, prepare, prepare.** The more prepared you are for practice and games, the better you'll be at keeping your focus where it needs to be. Make sure that you know your role and game plan, and that you've prepared yourself better than your opponent to execute that role and game plan.
- » **Know your cue words.** Have your focus cue word, phrase, or image in mind at all times. It should be something simple, like *focus*, *loose*, or *relax*. It can be a skill-related phrase as well, such as *hit solid*, *follow through*, or *quick feet*. (For more on cue words, turn to Chapter 7.)
- » **Know the focus points for your sport.** Every sport has unique focal points — from the ball in baseball, to your breathing and stroke in swimming, to the point where you want your serve to land in tennis. The clearer you are about your sport's unique focal points, the easier it'll be for you to execute those skills when competing.

- » **Simulate competition.** The more that you simulate competition in practice, the more opportunities you have to make sure you can handle the pressure of game day.
- » **Relax.** You need multiple ways to relax before competition so that your mind is in the ideal zone for focus. You may want to read, listen to music, take a nap, or do some muscle relaxation exercises. (Turn to Chapter 10 for more on the routines you can use to prepare for competition.)
- » **Use imagery.** The more time you spend with effective imagery, the better you get at paying attention to relevant details of your athletic success. In your imagery practice, see yourself focusing on relevant details so that when it comes time to compete, you've trained your brain to pay attention to those things. (See Chapter 7 for more on using imagery.)
- » **Develop your own ideal routines.** Routines help you to stay focused on what's relevant by keeping your emotions in their ideal state and your mind centered on performance. (See Chapter 10 for more on routines.)
- » **Have a specific goal or purpose for everything you do that is related to your sport.** The more specific your goal or purpose, the more you teach your brain to focus on that goal or purpose and move toward success.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Identifying the two main types of imagery
- » Knowing what makes an image work
- » Figuring out what, when, and where to practice imagery
- » Improving your imagery work by evaluating your progress

Chapter 7

Tool #2: Seeing Is Believing: Employing Imagery

Elite athletes such as Muhammed Ali, Tom Brady, and Serena Williams all used imagery in their careers. You may have heard them refer to it by the more commonly used term *visualization* (see the nearby sidebar “Visualization versus imagery: What’s in a name?”), but if you’re like most people, you’re not quite sure what this tool is, how they use it, or how *you* can use it to improve your own athletic performance.

Imagery is a skill you can develop just like any other — in fact, we frequently teach it to some of the best athletes in the world. In this chapter, we explain what imagery is, why many elite athletes use it, and how you can begin practicing it, too.

One final point before we dive in: Imagery isn’t just for touchy-feely, new-age people. Using imagery *can* involve quieting your mind and closing your eyes, but you can also practice imagery by writing in a journal, watching a film, listening to music, or watching your favorite and best athletes compete. Those are all great ways to use imagery. The key is to use what works for *you*.



TECHNICAL
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VISUALIZATION VERSUS IMAGERY: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Although the term *visualization* is more commonly used among athletes and coaches than the term *imagery* is, we use the term *imagery* throughout this book. Here's why: When you think of visualizing something, you may only think about "seeing" it in your mind. The fact is that the best form of imagery uses *all* your senses — sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste — as well as *muscle imagery* (feeling the muscles move in a way you want them to). The term *imagery* better encompasses all of what's involved in using the power of your mind to achieve your goals.

Introducing Imagery

Imagery is using all your senses to create or re-create an experience in your mind. You can think of it as "focused daydreaming" (see the nearby sidebar "Imagery: It's not just daydreaming" for more on the distinction between the two). You may not have realized it, but you've probably already used imagery — both in your athletic training and in your everyday life.

Do you ever think about a game or competition the night before and picture how you'll perform? Do you see yourself making the winning shot in the last seconds of the game or throwing the winning touchdown pass? Can you hear and feel the soft thump of the racket as you ace your opponent with your killer serve? If so, you're using imagery.

Imagery can be broken down into two broad categories: internal and external. We cover both in the following sections. Once you understand the different types — internal and external — you can then explore what sensations work best for you — physical, visual, and/or auditory. Athletes use both types — internal and external — as well as all of the sensations (physical, visual, and auditory), and you should figure out which forms and sensations work best for you. There is no right or wrong, there is just finding out what is effective for you.



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Research in the area of internal and external imagery is mixed with regards to which form of imagery is most effective for improving athletic performance. Most studies find that elite athletes typically use a combination of both forms of visualization in their mental training. The research *does* show, however, that imagery increases motivation, improves focus, reduces anxiety, and increases self-confidence. Not a bad return on your investment!

IMAGERY: IT'S NOT JUST DAYDREAMING

Have you ever sat in class, pretending to listen to your math teacher mumbling something about the Pythagorean theorem, while you were thinking about the big game coming up that weekend? Even though your body was physically in class, your mind was somewhere else. You were engaging in *daydreaming* — that phenomenon where you engage in fantasy thinking, usually of a happy sort, about something pleasurable in your life.

Daydreaming is one of those activities we engage in when we're bored and our minds wander. Daydreaming tends to be an unplanned, subconscious, and unfocused event. This doesn't mean that your daydreaming is irrelevant or trivial, but it lacks the purpose and intention that accompanies imagery.

When you use imagery, you're doing so purposefully, with the intent of improving some aspect of your performance. You're consciously deciding to engage in this skill. You're intentional about what you want or need to visualize about. Maybe you're preparing for an upcoming competition, trying to relax and sleep, or trying to see yourself executing a solid game plan. Whatever the reason, your decision to visualize is a conscious one, complete with intention and purpose. It's a directed effort to improve your physical skills through successful mental rehearsal of those skills.

It is also important to be aware of how you might be thinking of negative things, such as losing a competition, making mistakes, or feel fear about your teammates or coaches not being happy with you. These can seem like daydreaming, but it can also be that our subconscious is used to worrying and thinking about worse case scenarios. You need to be aware of when your mind might be doing such things because it is all too common. This is when you want to accept that it is happening, but try to redirect your mind to imaging the things and experiences and feelings you will be or want to be occurring.

High-achieving athletes from all sports don't simply daydream — daydreams are fantasy without direction. The best athletes in the world use imagery, and they make it part of their mental toolbox. They're driven and intentional about it, and they know how to use it to achieve success.

How imagery helps change and build better mindsets

Imagery is a powerful and underestimated tool to have in your sports psychology toolbelt. The reason behind this is that you are literally changing your neural pathways in your brain, the same way you do when you are physically practicing. Your brain doesn't know the difference between the two, if you do it correctly! Therein lies the power of having imagery as one of your tools: You can work

smarter, not harder, toward improving your sports skills, without the dangers of overexertion, physical fatigue, and chance of injury. When you practice your imagery, you are literally changing your mind! How cool is that?

Internal imagery: From your own point of view

The term *internal imagery* refers to the experience of imagining an athletic experience from your own point of view. It's the most common form of imagery.

For example, maybe you imagine yourself hitting a home run to deep left field in the bottom of the ninth inning of an important baseball game. In your mind, you see the pitch headed straight down the middle of the plate, belt high. You feel yourself extend your arms and turn your hips quickly as you connect solidly with the ball. You feel the sweet thud that accompanies solid contact. As you watch the ball begin its ascent into the sky deep toward left field, you can feel your excitement building. The ball gets smaller and smaller and eventually flies over the left-field wall, landing in the bleachers, among the throng of cheering fans. This experience, from your own point of view, is an example of internal imagery.

External imagery: Looking at yourself from the outside

External imagery, on the other hand, is where you look at yourself from the outside, as if you're being filmed. External imagery is less common than internal imagery.

For example, maybe you imagine the pitcher throwing the pitch, but this time, from the viewpoint of someone sitting in the stands behind home plate. You can see the ball cross the plate, and watch yourself turn on it suddenly and powerfully. You watch the trajectory of the ball and the speed with which it lofts deep toward left field. You see the left fielder turn their back to the infield and attempt to make a catch at the wall. You see the crowd rising up in their seats in anticipation of the home run, and you can hear the deafening roar as they scream in unison in delight. As the ball lands beyond the left-field wall, you can see yourself rounding the bases at a quick pace, with a smile on your face. You see yourself cross home plate and high-five your teammates. This experience, from the point of view of a bystander, is an example of external imagery.

Determining What Type of Imager You Are

In order to get the most out of imagery, you need to understand what type of imagery works best for you. Some people are very visual — they can easily remember the visual details of situations or experiences. Others are more auditory — they remember what people said at those moments or the roar of the crowd. Still others are physically oriented — they can easily recall how the experience felt for them, down to the feel of the bat in their hands and the pounding of their hearts.



REMEMBER

You use all three types of imagery (visual, auditory, and physical) at one time or another, but you may find yourself naturally drawn to or preferring one type. Knowing which type of imagery you prefer is important, because it allows you to create images that make the most sense to you. When we work with athletes and coaches, we try to find out what their preferred images are so that we can help them build the imagery program that's most useful to them.

Which type of imager are you? In the following sections, we show you some ways to answer that question for yourself.



REMEMBER

Even though you may lean toward one type of imagery over another, you can and should look for ways to make your imagery as vivid as possible, and that means incorporating all the senses. Knowing what type of imagery resonates most deeply with you should help you kick your images up a notch, not limit you in any way.

Visual: Monkey see, monkey do

Many people are visual learners. They learn new concepts and retain memories best through *seeing*. If you fall into this category, you have the following characteristics:

- » You learn best by reading.
- » You can easily recall details, such as the color of someone's eyes or clothing.
- » You give or need directions based on visual landmarks, such as "Turn right at the gas station with the green sign" or "Turn two streets past the McDonald's."
- » You have an uncanny ability to recognize faces (even though you may not remember a person's name) from your past, such as a classmate from 20 years ago.



TIP

If you tend to be a visual learner, try designing and thinking about images that are more visual in nature. So, when you're thinking about how you'll perform in tomorrow's game, do so with visuals or pictures. For example, a soccer player would see what the ball looks like as it bends toward the net, a tennis player would see themselves serve as a "ball of fire" traveling over the net with high speed, and a golfer would picture their ball as a red laser line going straight to the hole.

Auditory: I hear you loud and clear

Auditory learners use their hearing as their most important sense when trying to remember something. You know you're an auditory learner if the following characteristics apply to you:

- » You learn best by listening to your teacher or coach.
- » You can easily remember the exact wording that someone used when relaying a message to you.
- » When listening to music, you can identify songs quickly, sometimes after hearing only a couple of notes.



TIP

If you're an auditory learner, use sounds as part of your imagery practice. For example, a basketball player would hear the swoosh as the ball travels through the net, a gymnast would hear soft classical music in their mind as they prepare to relax for the next event, and a quarterback would hear the voice of their coach saying, "Stay calm and confident."

Physical: I feel you, man

Physical learners rely primarily on muscle movement and muscle memory. They do best when they feel their muscles execute skills. They can sit perfectly still and know what their muscles feel like when they're shooting a perfect free throw, placing a great baseline shot, or swinging the perfect drive off the tee.

Many athletes rely on physical imagery because movement and muscle memory are an important part of athletic movement.

Here are some characteristics of physical learners:

- » You learn best by doing and by feeling the proper movement. It's not enough for someone to explain it to you — you have to do it.
- » You feel more confident when you can practice skills repeatedly to ingrain those skills in your muscle memory.

- » Images and words make you think about and feel your muscle movement. Your palms get sweaty, your muscles start firing, and your heart starts pumping.



TIP

If you're a physical learner, try to include feel and muscle movement in your imagery. For example, a rifle shooter will feel their hands soft and relaxed on the gun, a golfer will feel their shoulder turn inside their body, and a gymnast will feel the powerful push off the mat into a round-off handspring.

Considering the Key Characteristics of Ideal Images

Each athlete is unique in the images that work best for them, but every ideal image — whether it's visual, auditory, or physical — has two key characteristics:

- » **Vividness:** When you experience your images, they should be crystal clear, like the image you see when watching an HDTV. You can hear the crowd, smell the fresh grass field, feel the cool temperature of the air, taste the sweat rolling off your upper lip, see yourself executing drills perfectly, or feel the looseness and smoothness of your muscle movements. The more vivid the image, the better.
- » **Successful:** You should see yourself executing skills flawlessly. For example, a tennis player should see themselves hitting a powerful serve and watch the ball speed by their opponent for an ace. A quarterback should see themselves relaxed in the pocket as they throw a perfect, tight spiral and hit the receiver in stride. You want to control the images you experience. See only what you want: success!

We cover both of these characteristics in the following sections.

Painting images with vivid detail

How clear and vivid you make your images will determine in part how successful your performance will be. Research clearly shows that the more vivid your images, the better you'll perform as an athlete. When you first start working on using imagery, you may find that making your images vivid is difficult. But, just as with your athletic skills, the more you practice, the better your images will be.



One of the best ways to improve vividness in your imagery is to start by trying to make simple images as vivid as possible. For example, read the following narrative and then see if you can close your eyes and see the image vividly:

Picture a lemon right in front of you. Pay attention to the texture of the lemon. See the exact color of yellow. Adjust the color in your mind to create the exact color that you want to see. Are there any marks on the skin of the lemon? What's the texture of the lemon like? How large is it? Now see the lemon being cut in half. Notice the smell of the lemon. Notice the pulp and the juice dripping from the halves of the lemon. Is your mouth watering? Maybe your tongue can feel the distinctive tart flavor of the lemon. What sound is made if you squeeze the lemon? Can you feel the acidic juice and the sweet stickiness on your hands? Notice the smell wafting into your nostrils.

Try to master this image with all the details you can draw upon to make it as life-like as possible. Now that you have a better idea of what we mean by vividness, here are some more examples that you can practice with. Start with these and then move on to more advanced images, when you get the hang of it.

- » Visualize the place where you spend a lot of time practicing your sport, whether it be a tennis court, a football field, an ice hockey rink, a track, a swimming pool, or someplace else. See yourself right in the middle of your field of play. Notice everything around you. Are you outside? Inside? Is it sunny? Cloudy? How bright are the lights? Do you notice any smells — grass, sweat, chlorine, the distinctive odor of an old gym? What sounds do you hear? Are other players there? Practice imaging this place, and make the image as clear as possible.
- » Visualize a piece of your sports equipment. Notice the exact color. Are there any marks on it? If so, what are they? What is the brand of this piece of equipment? What is the texture of the equipment? Is it rough or smooth? Picture and visualize everything about this piece of equipment just as if it were in your hands right now.

As you practice, try rating your vividness on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being the most vivid). This evaluation is particularly important when you first start using imagery, because it'll help you track your progress. You can give yourself an overall vividness rating for the imagery, but also for the individual senses as well (sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing, and muscle movement). By rating each sense, you'll become better at using all of them.

As your simpler images become more vivid, you can begin trying more complicated images, such as seeing yourself execute your skill in actual game situations. (For more on evaluating your imagery, check out “Evaluating the Success of Your Imagery,” later in this chapter.)

Picturing images of your success

In order for your images to be successful, they must be images of you experiencing success. You need to see yourself being successful in terms of both outcome and skills. Whatever the image in your mind, your brain reacts to it by getting appropriately aroused, and your muscles follow suit. So, if you see yourself screwing up or losing, you're essentially preparing your body to fail. On the other hand, if you're able to imagine things exactly as you want — with perfect execution and success — you're increasing the probability that these things will happen.

For example, if you're a golfer stepping up to the tee and you start to worry or see your shot going into the trees, more often than not, guess what happens next? You'll find yourself in the trees!



REMEMBER

Imagery happens intentionally *and* unintentionally. When you're sitting down with the intent of using imagery, you probably won't have trouble picturing yourself doing well. However, the imagery that creeps into your mind when you least expect it can be just as powerful, and you need to get control of that imagery as well. Part of a successful imagery program is using imagery consciously and consistently, so that you can counteract any unintentional *negative* imagery that might creep into your mind.



TIP

If you're having a hard time seeing yourself being successful when you use imagery, you need to try to figure out why, so that you can work to counteract that tendency. Difficulty in coming up with successful images can be due to a variety of factors, including the following:

» **You may have had a recent poor performance, or a string of recent poor performances, and you're having trouble letting go of the negative images.** If so, try to go back in time and find a better, more successful performance to use in your imagery.

» **You may have just learned a new skill or found yourself in a new game situation, and you're having trouble seeing successful performances in your mind because you haven't had any yet.** If so, try to imagine how others (maybe famous athletes you've watched over the years) have performed (or *would* perform) in those situations, and then place yourself in that situation, performing as they did.



TIP

Videotape yourself. Then, when you do it successfully, you'll have it on tape and can view it over and over as part of your imagery program.

» **You may not have prepared enough to create successful images.** Have you practiced enough? Are you prepared well physically? Are you as fit as you can be? If not, you need to be better prepared. In the short term, copy

someone else — perhaps a more successful athlete you admire. In the long term, develop better practice habits and get in the best shape you can be in.

» **You may be trying to make the image in your mind too complicated.**

If that's the case, try to break down the image into smaller parts. Remove some details. (Don't worry — you can always add them back again later.) For example, if you're imagining yourself kicking a field goal from 45 yards, you can remove details (for the time being) about the crowd noise, time of day, or weather, and instead build an image around lining up your kick, the approach and hold, and connecting solidly. When you have this image down pat, you can add back those extra details to make your image even more vivid.

» **Your subconscious is being bombarded with negative images.** As humans, we have this part of the brain from thousands of years ago called the amygdala. It is the part of the brain basically that creates the “fight-flight-freeze-fawn” responses that we experience on a regular basis. Back then it was meant to protect our survival. Today we still use it, but it is overused because we are safer on a daily basis than we were thousands of years ago. We still, for example, might see an intimidating tee shot and react with this same stress response, but our physical safety is not in danger. You need to be aware that all around us are negative images and information being fed to us — people who doubt you and say you cannot do something, people who are jealous and do not want you to succeed, and some people who might be mentally or verbally abusive. If these negative thoughts and images surround you, you have to practice blocking them as well as replacing them with positive images and thoughts. It takes practice and more practice, especially if you are surrounded by negativity on a consistent basis.

Getting Started with Imagery

As you begin to practice imagery, it can be helpful to start in a disciplined and structured manner. Just like any new skill, you need to get comfortable with the basics and build a strong foundation. Think of beginning an imagery skill practice as tiny habit formation. Start by doing 1–2 minutes and then build from there. But make sure you celebrate the 1–2 minutes as well!



TIP

Designate a specific time and place in which to practice imagery. In our work with athletes, we've found that morning (just after waking) and evening (just before bed) are the best and easiest times to engage in imagery. After you've established the basic habit, you can begin to experiment with different places and times for your imagery.

It's also important to consider how you position yourself as you practice imagery. If you begin by lying down, you may fall asleep. It's okay to rest (maybe this means you need rest), but you may have missed the good points of imagery. Be aware of how your body is positioned when you're doing imagery. Take a position that's conducive to creating a mindset of excitement and energy, such as standing or sitting.

You also have to take a systematic approach to learning and improving your imagery skills. You can't just practice imagery every once in a while and expect long-term results. Research shows that imagery is practiced by the best athletes in the world on a consistent, daily, basis. It's hard to argue with their success! Set aside some time every day. Block off your calendar and spend that time visualizing yourself succeeding in your task or sport. A little bit of practice daily, compounded by weeks, will bring you great results!



REMEMBER

You may find yourself tempted to stop practicing because you don't think it's helping quickly enough, or you may think that it takes too long, but hang in there! You didn't develop your athletic skills overnight, and the same is true of your imagery skills. But the reward is worth the effort.



TIP

Although you can certainly master imagery on your own, you may be able to master it more quickly by working with a sports psychologist. A professional can help you build a solid understanding of imagery right from the start, which will accelerate your skills in using this tool.

What to imagine

The list of things you can imagine — things that deal with successful performances in your sport — is virtually endless. In the following sections, we offer some general categories for you to try when developing your own imagery program. See which types of images work best for you. And, down the road, remember to come back to the ones that don't work for you so well right now. As you grow as an athlete, your imagery will evolve as well.



TIP

Imagine in real time. Start in slow motion (especially when you're learning a new skill, so that you can perfect the action image in your mind) and eventually move to real time or fast-forward as your images improve. The goal is to see yourself competing at the same pace and tempo as if the event were actually occurring.

Skill development and execution

One common form of imagery is imagining yourself executing a certain skill with absolute perfection. For example, a tennis player can visualize themselves executing a powerful and focused backhand. A lineman in football can see themselves jumping off the line quickly and pancaking the defensive lineman opposite them.

Research shows that if you're learning a new skill, you learn it faster when you add imagery to your regular practice schedule. Use that to your benefit by visualizing yourself executing technical aspects of your sport perfectly. The more you visualize skill execution, the more consistent your skills become.



TIP

As you're practicing the imagery, break down the particular skill (for example, shooting a free throw) into technical steps (feet shoulder width apart, arm bent at the elbow in an *L* shape, and so on).

Mental state

Imagine the mental state you want to have when you're competing. If you want to be confident, then see yourself behaving, feeling, and talking confidently — imagine yourself holding your head high, back straight, smooth and fluid in your movements, with a pep in your step. If you want to work on being focused, see yourself acting, thinking, and feeling this way.

The more comfortable and consistent the state becomes in your mind, the more consistent it will be on the field and in real life. The mind can't differentiate between something that is vividly imagined and something that is actually experienced.

In order to imagine your mental state, you need to know your ideal mindset or mental state. Think about what your ideal mindset might be — focused? Relaxed? Excited? Fearless? Calm? Many athletes have similar words to describe ideal mental states, but make sure to find the words or phrases that best represent yours. You can think back to some of your best performances as a way to find these words and phrases. (See Chapter 2 to learn more about developing your ideal mindset.)

Energy level

You can imagine yourself maintaining ideal energy levels. For example, a football player may want to see themselves calm an hour before the game to reserve energy, but then see their energy level explode each and every play of the game, all the way through the fourth quarter. A golfer may want to see themselves remaining very calm and centered throughout an entire tournament, never getting too high or too low emotionally or mentally.

Response to mistakes

Because you *will* make some type of mistake every single practice or competition, you need to be able to anticipate mistakes and form a plan of attack for managing them. If you don't have a plan, you run the risk of compounding your mistake with another one.

For example, if you're a basketball player and you lose the ball bringing it up the court, you may find yourself getting angry and fouling the opposing player who stole the ball in retaliation. With an imagery plan, you can see yourself reacting quickly and trying to get in between the player and the basket, waiting for your team to come back for support. If you're a tennis player, imagine yourself responding like a champion after you double fault, being focused on the next shot and not getting caught up in the mistake emotionally.

The time to do this imagery is not necessarily right before practice or competition, but at times during the week or during downtime or even during an off-season (not that there is such a thing anymore) so that you do not put a negative image in your mind (making a mistake) right before practice or a game.

When to use imagery



REMEMBER

When you're just starting out, it's important to practice imagery at the same time and in the same place, if possible. By doing so, you put your sole focus on this skill, and your disciplined approach to its development will eventually pay off.

When you get more comfortable with imagery, you can begin to practice and use it in many different places and times. You'll also see that practice will provide you with the ability to achieve greater results in shorter periods of time, because you'll be much more effective at using it.

Imaging before, during, and after practice

If you were to practice your sport once a week (right before a game or competition), you probably wouldn't get optimal results or performance. The same applies to your mental training, including imagery. You need to be practicing your imagery as often as possible during the week. Regular and frequent practice will make you better and more efficient in practice, thereby increasing your odds of successful performance. These imagery practice sessions are meant to simulate your desired mental state prior to competition.

BEFORE PRACTICE

In this drill, you take ten minutes before practice to write in a *performance journal* (a journal in which you track your goals and thoughts about your practice and competitions). Write down what you're trying to accomplish during practice that day. After you've done this, close your eyes and imagine yourself accomplishing your practice objectives. See yourself doing so as vividly as possible.

We've encouraged many coaches to dedicate the first ten minutes of team practice to imagery, but you can do this on your own if your coach doesn't make the time for it — just get to practice ten minutes earlier than everyone else.



REMEMBER

Greatness takes discipline and hard work. If you can take this time to get focused and be intentional about what you're seeking to get out of practice that day, the quality of your practice and skill development will rise dramatically.



TIP

If writing doesn't come easily for you, you can use a recorder to verbalize your ideal performance before you begin practice. Some athletes find that saying it out loud is even more effective than writing about it. When you record yourself (depending on the type of recorder you use), you can save these recordings to your computer, phone, or iPod and listen to them repeatedly.

If you have a prerecorded imagery program — maybe done by a sports psychologist or motivational speaker — you can take this time before practice to listen to the audio. You can also listen to music to create the mental state or energy level you want or listen to a favorite podcast such as ours or other performance consultants, coaches, or great speakers.

DURING WARM-UP

Warm-up is an ideal time for you to be thinking about and imagining yourself being successful. You can create the ideal mental state you desire immediately prior to a competition.

You can also use this time to see yourself being successful and focused in practice. If you're successful and focused in practice, chances are much greater that you'll be able to repeat that great performance in competition.

The mental warm-up is an underused and underrated process. Athletes always warm up physically, but they often do not mentally and emotionally warm up. This is a huge miss by both athletes and coaches! The mind and heart work together to determine the quality of a practice or game. In fact, your mental state is the main thing that determines your success right before a practice or game! Your fitness and skill are not going to change immediately before a game, but your mind can. Imagery is a way to mentally and emotionally warm up. When you are in the mental space you desire, you will compete at your best. When you compete at your highest skill level, you will be successful. And success creates more confidence.

DURING BREAKS

In practice, regardless of your sport, you usually have breaks in the action. You can use these times to practice imagery. If you're in one of those breaks, quickly imagine yourself succeeding in the next drill. This can be especially important if you're having difficulty getting a certain drill or you're having a particularly rough practice. Take some time to imagine how you want to perform, and then go do it!

AFTER PRACTICE

Make sure to evaluate and imagine after practice. If the practice was successful, you can use the images that are still fresh in your mind to mentally mark what success looks like. If you didn't perform the way you hoped in practice, you can imagine yourself performing more successfully next time. Using imagery after practice leaves you in a better place mentally.

Many athletes have difficulty forcing themselves to practice imagery after practice, because they just want to get out of the locker room as soon as possible and get something to eat or move on with their day. But don't neglect this critical part of your imagery program. You just practiced for a couple hours — take another five minutes to jot down or think about what you did well and what you need to improve. Make post-practice imagery part of your daily practice routine.

Imaging before competition

One of the primary benefits of doing visualization the night before and the morning of a big game or match (if it's a late-afternoon or evening competition) is that it helps you keep your mind and body focused on those things most relevant to performing well. It's all too easy to let your mind wander to the "what ifs," such as "What if we lose?" or "What if I screw up?" or "What if we don't make the playoffs?" It also helps you to take time to quiet and clear your head from all the clutter of the past week, both on and off the field. At this point, competition is your opportunity to have fun, execute your skills as best you can, and compete fiercely.

When it comes to imaging before competition, a common theme with most athletes is to simply see themselves putting it all together and competing well. Your physical practice sessions are now over, and the only thing remaining is to prepare your mind and body for the upcoming competition. By developing an imagery program, you are ready on game day. You have prepared your mind all week so now you can just have fun! And when you have fun, you do not think and usually perform extremely well.



TIP

One journaling technique you can try is to write a newspaper or magazine headline for the day after competition. Then write the story of what's going to happen as if it already did. For example, your headline might read "Local Pitcher Dominates in Title Game, Gets Looks from Scouts." Act as if this headline will appear in the newspaper the day after your performance and your task is to write the story that readers will see. This journaling technique is a very powerful form of imagery.



WARNING

Make sure not to practice imagery if you're too tired — you don't want to fall asleep during your imagery practice, nor do you want to wear yourself out mentally trying to imagine the next day's success. If you're too tired, the imagery won't be effective. Finally, if you get pumped with too much adrenaline after imagining greatness in your sport, you may find it hard to sleep. If this sounds familiar, do your imagery earlier in the evening, not right before bed.



REMEMBER

Many athletes train and practice extremely hard and then get extremely nervous 24 hours before competition. If this sounds familiar, keep in mind that this is the time to *enjoy* playing your sport. The hard work is over — now you can compete, which is why you play your sport to begin with. The fun comes from challenging yourself in a competitive situation. This is when your visualization can pay off — as you see yourself relaxed, enjoying competition, and putting together all the pieces of your training to go out and kick some major butt! This is why you want to prepare and practice your mindset throughout the week — so it is ready!

Where to use imagery



REMEMBER

When you're just getting started, you should try to practice imagery at a similar time and place every time you do it. You'll probably learn the skills best when you manage the environmental variables (noise, light, and so on), and keep as many of them the same as you can. A consistent environment will help you learn the skills without having to adapt to different times and places.



TIP

That first location for your imagery practice should be

- » **Quiet and free of distractions:** Try to choose a place where you have less possibility of being interrupted or distracted by noises coming from nearby rooms or outside. Basements are good places for this.
- » **Private and large enough for you to sit or lie comfortably:** If you don't have enough room, or you're worried that someone is going to walk in on you, you'll be distracted.

» **Not too warm or too cold:** If you're too hot or too cold, you'll be distracted. Look for a place that's about 70°F (21°C), or a temperature that's comfortable for you.

After you've practiced imagery for a while and you've become more comfortable with it, you'll have far fewer limits on where or when you can perform this skill. You can do it in the bus on the way to practice or a game, in the locker room, on the bench, or even on the field or court. Eventually, you'll be able to use imagery in just a couple of minutes, even with distractions. In fact, when you're able to use imagery at various times and in different places, you know that your skill level has reached great heights!

Setting up an imagery program

As with anything else, you need to put in time and effort to see results with your imagery program. Remember the biological basis here: Every time you imagine and visualize something vividly, you are laying down new pathways into your brain and experiencing these images as if they are really happening. When you mentally practice a physical skill, your brain doesn't know you're aren't actually doing it (and this is a good thing!). So, it is important to understand that it will take a little time for you to start seeing results from your imagery program.

Make sure you are also making adjustments to your program as you go. You may need to alter images, or change what you are focusing on (because of feedback from your coach, for example), but keep in mind that your daily practice will have tremendous results long-term!

Evaluating the Success of Your Imagery

The success of your imagery depends on your systematic and consistent approach to it. If you only do it every now and then and don't evaluate your progress, your imagery won't improve and it won't help your athletic performance. On the other hand, if you regularly practice using imagery, and you evaluate yourself and learn along the way, you'll get better at using imagery — and you'll see better results in your athletic performance as well. Every time you practice imagery, even if for a couple of minutes, celebrate it! This celebration releases a chemical in your body called dopamine and that will make you want to do it again and again because of the good feelings it creates!



REMEMBER

Think of your imagery practice the same as you do your athletic skills and physical fitness. If you practice well and practice often, you improve. If you only give it a half-hearted effort, and only when you feel like it, you won't improve. It's as simple as that.

On a basic level, you need to evaluate the vividness and success of each of the images you use. For the first 30 days that you practice imagery, evaluate yourself every time, to track your progress. After this initial evaluation period, you may feel more confident in your skills and not have to formally evaluate yourself as often, but we recommend you continue to evaluate your imagery at least once every two to four weeks, just to make sure you're keeping this skill sharp. As you know from your athletic skills, just because you get good at something or master it, doesn't mean you can slack off. You always have to continue to refine and practice the skill; otherwise, you get rusty and may even lose the skills you worked so hard to develop.

A SAMPLE IMAGERY SCRIPT

The following imagery script is a sample for a baseball or softball player in an upcoming game. You can create your own scripts based on what you're trying to imagine — accomplishing a goal in practice, staying relaxed in pressure situations, staying focused amidst numerous distractions, keeping your energy up when you're tired and exhausted, or staying loose throughout a game.

Although this script is for a baseball or softball player, you can easily adapt it to your own sport and individual skills. The following text is meant to give you some basic idea of what imagery is when it's all put together. Notice how we've incorporated all the senses — this is the best and most effective method of imagery.

Get yourself into a comfortable position. Take a few deep cleansing breaths to bring yourself into the present moment, and begin to allow your mind to slow down as you feel your muscles relax. Feel the excitement over the upcoming game slowly rising in your chest, knowing that this is why you practice so hard and so often — so you can have fun competing and playing well! You know that this imagery exercise will allow you to see yourself compete and play exactly as you know how and exactly as you desire.

Before imagining the upcoming game, think back to a game when you played your best. Remember how well you performed, how relaxed you felt, and how excited and yet calm you were. You were at the plate, and everything was quiet in your mind. All you saw was that ball coming from the pitcher's hand and how slow it was coming, as you counted the laces on the ball, and how good it felt to make solid, strong contact as you ripped a base hit. You felt tremendous confidence at the plate, and you knew how quick your hands were, and that you were going to hit well that day. Even

though the ball was coming at a high rate of speed, it seemed to slow down. You were completely zeroed in on the ball.

You can even remember teammates and coaches cheering and jumping up and down after this great hit. You can even remember how fluid and strong and quick your body felt. The crowd and fans were cheering and rooting you on! You recall the joy and excitement and confidence you felt, and how well you performed. Remember that feeling of how effortless and automatic it was that day. No thinking, no “trying” — just letting your body do what you trained it to do. Think about the word you might’ve used that day as a cue word, such as “quick hands” or “hit solid.” Take these feelings, thoughts, and emotions and feel them throughout your body, because you know that this is how you think, feel, and behave when you’re performing well.

Now begin to think about your upcoming competition. Think about the venue — you’re on your home field. Notice everything as if you’re there right now. Notice the temperature, and how it feels on your cheeks and your arms. Notice all of the different people — coaches, teammates, opponents, fans, family, friends, and umpires. Feel the wind and the sun. Take in all the sounds around you as well — talking with your teammates, coaches building you up, fans cheering, music playing. Notice any smells — perhaps the freshly cut grass of the field. Feel your muscles being warmed up and ready to go. You feel light on your feet, you feel strong, your muscles are fluid and relaxed, your entire body just feels ready, confident, powerful, and strong. You can even taste the salt in your sweat as you’re readying yourself to compete! You feel the excitement, the calmness in your mind, the fun of finally doing what you enjoy doing most!

Now see yourself at the plate. You’re calm, yet very intense and focused at the plate, like a cat intently watching a mouse. You walk to the batter’s box and stare down the pitcher. You’re going to hit anything this pitcher throws your way. You’re too good, too prepared, and too focused — the pitcher has no chance of getting the ball past you. You feel how relaxed your arms are, knowing that your hands can get around on any pitch, in any location. You repeat your cue words, “quick hands,” over and over again in your head quietly as you stare down the pitcher. When the pitch is thrown, you simply see it all the way in and you feel your body in motion forward, making hard and powerful contact, just as you knew you would. You start running the bases, feeling ever so confident and knowing that you can get another hit next time. You feel strong and powerful, unbeatable, and you see the disappointment in the pitcher’s eyes as you stand on base, ready to do it all over again next time!

Figure 7-1 is an example of an evaluation form you can use (taken from Todd’s book, *Athlete’s Journal*, which you can find at www.athleticmindinstitute.com). You may want to photocopy this page, and store all your evaluations in a binder or file folder to track your progress, and see which images are particularly effective for you.

Imagery Evaluation

Date: _____ Location: _____

Images

1. _____

Vividness	1	2	3	4	5
-----------	---	---	---	---	---

Successfulness	1	2	3	4	5
----------------	---	---	---	---	---

2. _____

Vividness	1	2	3	4	5
-----------	---	---	---	---	---

Successfulness	1	2	3	4	5
----------------	---	---	---	---	---

3. _____

Vividness	1	2	3	4	5
-----------	---	---	---	---	---

Successfulness	1	2	3	4	5
----------------	---	---	---	---	---

Total time: _____

Ideas and lessons for future imaging practice: _____

FIGURE 7-1:
Evaluating your
imagery is a key
part of your
success.

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IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Putting your inner critic in their place
- » Looking at the effect self-talk has on performance
- » Changing the messages you send yourself
- » Improving your performance with positive self-talk

Chapter 8

Tool #3: Self-Talk: Don't Yell in Your Own Ear

Whether you realize it or not, you're in a constant conversation with yourself, called *self-talk*. Sometimes that conversation is spoken out loud (for example, when you talk to yourself on the baseline before a serve, or when you psych yourself up as you approach the starting block), but more often, the conversation is in your head.

Sometimes the messages you send yourself are positive — “I know I can do this,” “I’m the best hitter on the team,” “Damn, I’m fast!” And sometimes the messages are negative — “I’ll never win this race,” “I can’t catch a pass to save my life,” “I suck.” What you tell yourself — positive and negative — is powerful. And most important, you have control over the messages you send, which means you can harness the power of your own thoughts to improve your performance in all areas of your life, including sports.

Another way to look at self-talk in addition to positive or negative is “effective or ineffective,” “healthy or unhealthy,” or “helpful or not helpful.” These terms can help you avoid judgment and get away from thinking in positives or negatives. For simplicity’s sake, we mostly use the terms positive and negative in this book.

In this chapter, we describe the consequences of positive and negative self-talk and help you use self-talk to your advantage.

Your Inner Critic Is Not You

Before you learn more about how to master using this tool known as self-talk, it is important to think about what self-talk is and isn't. Self-talk is that voice in your head, the one that you hear loud and clear when you make a mistake, and the one that you tend to dismiss when you kick butt and succeed. Sometimes we call it our *inner roommate*. If your inner roommate is always very critical, maybe you shouldn't be giving them free rent!

This voice is your constant companion, sometimes in the background, other times at the forefront of your awareness. Although self-talk is part of being human, understand that *you are not your thoughts*. In other words, your thoughts are a part of being human, but they are not you. They are but a small part of your existence. This is an important distinction, particularly because people tend to be so habitually negative in their self-talk statements. People can have negative thoughts and still be good. Keep this in mind as you read the chapter.

Research shows that 95 percent of self-talk involves automatic thoughts, meaning that we are not actively making them happen. If your self-talk is positive and helpful, you are in good shape. But if it's more critical and ineffective, which is true for most people because they hear such criticism throughout their lives, you are going to struggle more. How often do you receive praise and how often is it pointed out that you screwed up? People consistently hear about their mistakes, and this can be important. However, if you are rarely reminded of how well you are doing, your self-talk will tend to be critical.



TIP

One task we encourage our athletes to do is to train themselves to focus on positive and productive aspects, even if their performances or practices were not as good as they hoped. We can always find positives! Todd encourages a process that he created, called the “3-2-1” method of journaling. In this process, you write down:

- » Three positive things you did in the game or practice
- » Two things you learned about yourself (instead of two ways you messed up — see how the question is different?)
- » One thing you are going to do in the next 24 hours to improve

Using this method, you begin to train your automatic thoughts to focus on the positive and effective instead of the immediately critical.



REMEMBER

Remember that your body always follows your automatic thoughts. If you are criticizing yourself, your body will follow, usually with tense muscles, distracted mind, rapid heart rate, and shallow breathing. You will not be able to perform to your skill level. If, however, you are consciously sending your body positive and effective self-talk, your body will respond by being relaxed, at ease, and focused.

Considering the Consequences of Self-Talk

Your self-talk — the messages you send yourself — directly affects how you feel and then how you behave. The good news is that you can choose which type of self-talk you engage in — minimizing the negative and maximizing the positive. In this section, we take a look at the two types of self-talk, and then explain the consequences of both.

The two types of self-talk: Positive and negative

Self-talk can be positive or negative, and both types of self-talk have a profound effect on performance.

Positive self-talk is made up of thoughts that lead to positive emotional reactions. Here are some common examples of positive self-talk in athletes, along with possible resulting emotional reactions:

Positive Self-Talk	Resulting Emotional Reaction
"I can do this!"	Excitement
"I've been here before."	Relaxation
"I'm not going to let them beat me!"	Determination
"I did it. It was all worth it."	Relief

Negative self-talk, on the other hand, leads directly to unwanted, unproductive, and harmful emotional reactions. Here are some common examples of negative self-talk in athletes, along with possible resulting emotional reactions:

Negative Self-Talk	Resulting Emotional Reaction
"I have to win!"	Anxiety
"What if I screw up?"	Worry
"I always mess things up."	Hopelessness
"I let down my team again."	Sadness

In our experience, having worked with top athletes from all over the world, we've found that people are much more conditioned (by society and western culture) to jump to *negative* thoughts. People are critical of every aspect of their lives, including their sports participation. And it's not just *athletes* being hard on *themselves* — fans cheer when athletes succeed and boo loudly when they fail. As an athlete, you can break that pattern. And when you do, you'll perform better — because you'll be more relaxed, excited, hopeful, and so on.

When it comes to mental training and all the tools we discuss in this book, it is important to know that you must "consciously" train and re-train your automatic thoughts to be helpful and positive. Remember, if 95 percent of the time your thoughts are automatic, use that other 5 percent to train your automatic thinking so that it is effective and helpful.

How self-talk affects performance, mindset, and mood

Self-talk affects performance in a very physical and measurable way. For each and every thought you have, there is a corresponding emotion and resulting physical response, all of which affects performance. Here are some examples of self-talk, the resulting emotions, and the physical consequences:

Self-Talk	Resulting Emotion	Physical Consequence
"I can do this!"	Excitement	Relaxed muscles
"What if I screw up?"	Nervousness	Muscle tightness

A STORY OF YOUR SELF-TALK

It's a nice spring day. The sun is shining, a few puffy clouds are in the sky, and it's about the perfect temperature. You feel the heat from the sun, but it isn't too hot — just right. You decide to take a walk through a local park. You're simply walking along through the park, not too many people are out and about because it's a weekday afternoon. You see a young girl coming toward you on her bike. She looks as happy as can be, just being a kid and enjoying riding her bike and being in the park. As she comes on the path toward you, she hits a bump, her back tire slides, and she falls off the bike. You're there to witness this fall. You know it wasn't a serious fall, but it was still scary for a kid.

What would you do in the situation? Why might you say to the child? Odds are, you'd probably help her up, make sure she was okay, and then maybe say something like, "Don't worry. Get back up there on that bike. You can do it." Or maybe something like, "It's okay. I fell off my bike too when I was your age." In other words, you'd probably be encouraging and helpful.

Let's change the scenario in the story a bit.

What if you were riding the bike and fell off? What would you say to yourself? Think about this for a second.

You probably wouldn't be that nice. You might scream, "You're such an idiot!" — either aloud or in your mind. You may even throw in a few expletives. You probably wouldn't treat yourself the same way you would treat that little girl. And you would never dream of screaming at that little girl the way you might berate yourself.

The things we actually say to ourselves are things we would seldom say to others. Try to be aware of your self-talk, whether positive or negative. **Remember:** Either way, it comes true.



TIP

The following ABCD model, developed by famous psychologist Albert Ellis, is an easy way to remember how self-talk affects performance:

- » **Activating event:** The situation (for example, striking out with the bases loaded)
- » **Belief:** How you think (for example, "I should never strike out") (otherwise known as mindset)
- » **Consequences:** How you feel (for example, sadness, worry, and anxiety)
- » **Dispute:** If the thought is illogical or irrational, you can then dispute the thought and replace it with something more rational and realistic



ANECDOTE

YOU DON'T SAY . . .

Sometimes, self-talk affects not only your own performance, but also that of other players. During a recent tennis match, Leif was watching a client face off in the finals of a tournament against a difficult opponent. It was a tight match. On the court behind his client, a men's semifinal match was going on. Suddenly, and very loudly, one of the players yelled, "I suck!", at the top of his lungs after he lost a big point. Spectators started laughing, and so did my client, who was about to start her next game. She played that game very relaxed and ended up winning. What about the player who yelled at himself on the other court? Not surprisingly, he played very poorly and was defeated (rather quickly) by his more focused (and less negative) opponent.

The situation is the starting point — it “activates” your thinking pattern, which creates your reaction. The most important aspect of this model is that your beliefs, or your self-talk, determine your reaction to that activating event. In fact, the situation itself has *no* impact — what you say or think about the situation creates your reaction. Therefore, the responsibility lies with *you* to control your thoughts. No opponent or umpire can cause you to be angry or upset without your consent.



REMEMBER

Every thought you have — and you have many, many more than you realize — is linked to a physical consequence (such as heart rate, breathing rate, or degree of muscle tension). Some research has indicated that each person has 40–60,000 thoughts per day! Your thoughts can even change the amount of stress hormones (such as cortisol and adrenaline) that your body releases into your bloodstream. So, there is a very definite reason to change the way you talk to yourself: Your health may depend on it!



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Cortisol is a stress hormone that is released from the adrenal gland, along with adrenaline, during times of stress. In small doses, cortisol can help improve performance by lowering your sensitivity to pain, improving memory, and giving you a burst of energy. Chronic stress and prolonged levels of elevated cortisol in the bloodstream, however, have been shown to have negative effects on the body, such as impaired thinking, elevated blood pressure, and slower healing from injury.

As an athlete, whether your self-talk is positive or negative is very important. If your self-talk is negative, you'll feel negative emotions (such as fear, worry, and panic), you'll experience corresponding changes in your body (such as muscle tightness, shallow breathing, and rapid heart rate), and your athletic performance will decline. If your self-talk is positive, however, you'll feel positive emotions (like relaxation), you'll experience corresponding changes in your body (such as decreased muscle tension), and your performance will improve.

Want a practical example? Consider a baseball pitcher. When their self-talk is negative (“I can’t believe I’ve walked three batters! My slider stinks!”), they will get nervous and/or angry, resulting in tight muscles. Can a pitcher with tight muscles throw as hard and as accurately as one with relaxed muscles? No. On the other hand, if the pitcher’s self-talk is positive (“One pitch at a time. Relax and throw to the mitt.”), they have a much greater chance of being relaxed and composed, resulting in smoother muscle movement and better chance of executing their pitches.



TIP

In order for you to consistently be at your best, you must make sure that your self-talk is consistently positive. Even a few words of self-talk can make a huge difference in your performance, for the better or for the worse.

Don’t lose sight of the *tone* of your self-talk. A harsh and critical tone, even with encouraging words, can hurt performance.



ANECDOTE

Todd was working with a college golfer who had recently had some success on one of the mini-tours. During his collegiate golf career, the player realized the importance of making his self-talk more positive, especially if he wanted to win at the national level and compete for a spot on the PGA Tour. In the beginning, he did very well practicing and changing his self-talk to be more positive. Sometimes, however, he said all the right words — such as “Relax” and “Just this shot” — but he would be screaming the words at himself in his mind, full of frustration. Even though the statements were *intended* to be positive, his tone overshadowed the content and led to poor performance. You need to pay attention not only to *what* you’re saying, but to *how* you’re saying it.

Changing the Channel on Ineffective Self-Talk

Negative self-talk has all kinds of negative repercussions (see the preceding section). Most of the time, you’re probably not aware of your own self-talk because it happens so quickly. All you feel (and then notice physically) is anxiety and pressure, and you have no idea how it got there. The self-talk that you use when you feel nervous or anxious is illogical and irrational. But you need to be aware of it before you can start to change it. So, the first step is to become more aware of how your self-talk — positive or negative in nature — happens. When you recognize what you’re saying to yourself and when, the next step is to stop the negative thoughts. And then, finally, you can replace those negative thoughts with positive ones.



REMEMBER

Self-talk is how you think. It's what happens in that small gap of time between an event (the stimulus) and your response. You're responsible for what you tell yourself, and you can change the emotions you feel simply by changing what you say to yourself.

The first step is to “accept” your self-talk. When you are able to accept your self-talk, you will be less bothered by it in the moment. It is part of being human and you are just trying to get better. When you fight it, the negative self-talk has power over you. You are spending time and energy trying to get it to go away, instead of accepting and noticing it. Accepting it is part of being human, and then letting it go. When you are aware and then accept these negative thoughts, they go away much more quickly and have a smaller negative impact on performance.

Paying attention to the messages you send yourself

Recognizing your own self-talk is challenging. Thoughts occur so quickly — and you have so many thoughts running through your mind all day — that it's difficult to become more aware of them.



TIP

Start by tracking your thought patterns. Here are some ways to do so:

- » **Make the commitment every day, every practice, and every game to try to pay attention to your self-talk.** You'll get better at paying attention with time, but it starts with your commitment to doing so.
- » **Think back and describe (in writing) your own successful and unsuccessful athletic performances.** Try to remember what you thought and how you felt. The goal here is to link your positive self-talk with your winning moments and your negative self-talk with your losses or failures. Don't worry if you can't remember exactly what you were thinking or feeling — just jot down whatever you remember and look for patterns.
- » **Carry a small self-talk notebook with you.** You can keep this notebook in your car, locker, or gym bag. At the end of every practice or game, write in your journal. Review your practice or competition and identify both positive and negative thought patterns and how they affected the day's performance. The sooner you can write about your experience after it happens, the more likely you are to remember exactly what you were thinking or feeling.
- » **Breathe.** It may sound simplistic, but when you slow down your breathing, it slows down your body and mind. Then you are more aware of your thought patterns, the ones working for you and ones working against you.

» **Wear a band or symbol.** Many athletes wear some sort of band around their wrists. Usually this band has meaning and something is printed on it or the color reminds them of a mental state. Todd encourages all of his athletes and performers to wear some sort of a band as a reminder to be aware of self-talk. It could have positive words or phrases on these bands such as “breathe” or “relax” or “next play.” Todd also designed golf ball markers with various words and phrases on them so that every time a golfer marks their ball, they see the positive word or phrase. You can also take a piece of athletic tape, write your word or phrase on it, and wrap it around your wrist on some part of your clothing or equipment.

When you begin tracking your thought patterns, identify whether they’re positive or negative. If they’re negative, ask yourself which of the following categories your self-talk falls into:

- » **Perfectionism:** Believing that you have to be perfect and that mistakes are unacceptable.
- » **Catastrophizing:** Turning a small mistake into a major negative event; making a mountain out of a molehill.
- » **All-or-nothing thinking:** Not leaving room for a middle ground. Things are either “all bad” or “all good.”
- » **Personalizing:** Believing that what others say and do is somehow connected to you.
- » **Buying into the fairness fallacy:** Thinking that sports are supposed to be fair and equal at all times.
- » **Blaming:** Holding other people responsible for your feelings; the opposite of personalizing.
- » **Generalizing:** Reaching a conclusion based on a single event or outcome.
- » **Fortune telling:** Believing that you know what’s supposed to happen; thinking as if you’re a fortune teller.
- » **Results-only thinking:** Believing that your self-worth is based on your athletic achievement.

When you can identify your two or three categories that your negative self-talk falls into, you can begin paying attention to your negative self-talk throughout your day. Journal about how you engage in this type of negative self-talk, whether at school, during practices or competitions, or in your relationships. This heightened awareness will help you begin to change your thinking pattern. For example, you can become aware of saying “I’m just not a good hitter, and I never will be,” and change it to something more positive and realistic, like “I had a bad day at the

plate, but I'm a good hitter and I'll keep working at it tomorrow." Remember to accept your critical thinking, then assert that you are doing your best to be aware and change. Many times it is easy to beat yourself up about not changing quick enough — now you are just criticizing yourself for the mistake in sports and then getting down on yourself for being negative. The double whammy! Be careful!

Stopping the negativity

After you've started to identify your positive and negative self-talk, the next step is to stop the negative thoughts as quickly as possible. When you notice a negative thought entering your mind, say to yourself (or even out loud if you're in a private place), "Stop!" Continue saying "Stop!" as many times as you need to in order to reduce the number of negative thoughts you have in your mind. If you tend to be a visual learner, you can visualize a bright red stop sign. The idea is to interrupt the negativity as soon as it starts. You can say this to yourself but also out loud. It does not mean you need to scream it, but you can say quietly, "I am having some negative self-talk. Every athlete does at times. I am stopping here and changing it." Awareness and acceptance are key!



TIP

Todd encourages his athletes to verbalize out loud what they are going to do — a golfer will call exactly where the shot will be going or a basketball player will call out exactly what they are going to do. This is not arrogance — this is simply voicing the words (and therefore picturing the images) describing what you want. This increases your chances of it happening.

You can also ask a coach or teammate to help you stop your negative thoughts by telling you to stop when they hear you say something negative, or when your body language looks as though you're starting to get down on yourself. All they have to do is tell you "Stop!", and you'll become aware that you had a negative thought and that you need to change it as soon as possible. If you want, you can have them replace "Stop!" with a cue word (like "Focus!") or a gesture (like a quick hand clap) that serves the same purpose.

If you want a technique that doesn't require you to actually talk to yourself out loud, you can stop negative thinking by wearing a rubber band around your wrist and simply snapping the rubber band every time you have a negative thought. This technique isn't for the faint of heart, because it actually does hurt a bit. Of course, that's the point — you want to link your physical pain to the psychological act of thinking a negative thought.

Replacing ineffective self-talk with effective self-talk

It isn't enough just to stop your negative thoughts (see the preceding section). You need to replace those negative thoughts with positive alternatives. There are three simple but powerful methods to dispute and change your negative self-talk: countering, reframing, and affirming. You can use all three of these methods to replace your negative self-talk with positive self-talk.

Countering

When you find yourself saying something negative or noticing a certain thought that you have repeatedly, you need to counter it with a more rational and logical thought. This is particularly true when you find yourself engaging in one of the illogical or irrational thought categories mentioned previously. For example, your negative thought might be, "I'll never make the team." But you can counter that negative thought with the following:

What makes me think I'll never make this team? Where's the evidence that I'm not going to ever make this team, and would it hold up in a court of law?

When you catch yourself thinking negatively, you can dispute that thought by asking logical, level-headed questions. Then the negative thought becomes less powerful and loses its grip over your emotions.

Reframing

Reframing is a method of looking at a situation from a different and more positive perspective. Your parents could put one of your kindergarten finger paintings in a beautiful frame, and even if your painting doesn't suddenly look like great art, it'll look a whole lot better. The same is true in your mind — you can take a situation that may, at first, appear negative and frame it in a less dreadful or damaging manner. For example, let's say you're having trouble hitting your first serve in a tennis match. Your negative self-talk might be, "I'll never get this. I've tried and tried, but I'll never get a first serve in. I just can't do it!" You can reframe the situation like this: "I'm not hitting my serve yet, but I can get better. It's still early in the match."

Visualize two different frames of these two actions, then absorb yourself and see the one that you want. Let the other picture fade to the side or background or simply disappear. It is as if you had two pictures hanging in your bedroom and you did not like one of them, so you simply removed it.



TIP

Reframing is a good tool to use when you want results quickly, because you simply take your initial reaction and put a pretty frame on it, immediately improving your view of the situation.

Affirming

Affirming allows you to construct and practice positive self-talk on a habitual basis. The first step is to take some time to write out positive and affirming statements about your performance — those that make you feel better, more focused, and so on. Here are a couple examples of the kind of statement we're talking about, one from a swimmer and the other from a golfer:

- » "I'm the hardest working swimmer in the 100-meter fly. Few people can match my desire. I'm successful because I out-train everyone, and when race time arrives, I feel calm because I'm prepared."
- » "I stay with my process every single time I prepare to putt. I put a great stroke on the putt and then move on. I expect to make every putt. I expect myself to make long putts. My mind is clear and focused because I feel every stroke smoothly."



TIP

Make sure your statements are

- » **Written in the present tense:** "I am" instead of "I will."
- » **Specific:** "Make smooth strokes" instead of "play good golf."
- » **Positive:** "Composed" instead of "not nervous."

After you've written your affirmations, spend a few minutes each day reading and meditating on them. You'll be surprised at the changes that occur! Keep a journal with you or simply write them on your smartphone. You will find great affirmations at various times. When you do so, pull out the journal or phone and write them down so that you can remember and use them later. After one season, Todd thinks it is important that an athlete have at least 50 new affirmations.



TIP

Table 8-1 is an example of a self-talk log that you can adapt and/or discuss in your performance journal to become more aware of, change, and improve your own self-talk.

TABLE 8-1

A Self-Talk Log

Athletic Situation	Emotions and Feelings Associated with That Athletic Situation	Your Self-Talk That Created Those Emotions	If Negative, Identify Pattern	Change Your Self-Talk to Make it More Positive Next Time	Anticipated Results and Feelings from Doing So Next Time?
Didn't start in the game	Angry, resentful, disappointed	"I got screwed!", "I'll never start!", "I should just quit."	Catastrophizing, all-or-nothing thinking	"It's just one game. Let's keep working." "When I get in, I'll make the most of it!"	Motivated, upbeat, positive, committed to success

Using Self-Talk to Improve Your Performance

When you're aware of how your thinking controls your reactions to your athletic experiences, you need to be more intentional about creating positive thought patterns over time. After all, anyone can do it for one game or one day — it takes sustained effort to create positive thought patterns over time. You'll want positive thinking and optimistic outlooks to be a part of your everyday habits.



REMEMBER

Reducing or stopping your negative self-talk is a good first step, but it's not enough. You need to replace those negative thoughts with positive, confidence-building self-talk statements. You need to "consciously" re-train your automatic thinking to be positive, effective, and productive.

Just as you would when trying to get better at swinging the tennis racquet or golf club, you have to manage your self-talk more consistently in order to improve it. It takes effective practice. Establishing solid patterns and habits is very important because how you practice is how you play. In the following sections, we offer some tips for how to improve your self-talk.



REMEMBER

Your mind is like a muscle, and just like a muscle, it has to be trained and worked out consistently. Although it may seem like a lot of work to prepare and change your negative thoughts and patterns, it takes practice to build up your endurance and ability to use these skills when needed. If you're a runner, and run only once a month to increase your endurance, you're going to be fighting an uphill battle. You need to be running at least three or four times a week if you want to build the endurance you need for races. Your mind is the same way.

Journaling and practicing self-talk before, during, and after practice

Spend a couple minutes before every practice or game thinking about and writing down your commitment to positive and productive self-talk. No matter what happens in practice, make sure that you work to look on the bright side. The more you engage in positive self-talk in practice, the greater the chance it'll automatically occur in competition. Use the techniques mentioned in the last section (like putting a band around your wrist) to keep practicing productive and effective self-talk.



Write down three goals you have for every practice and competition you compete in. If improving your positive self-talk is one of your goals as an athlete, use this goal-setting exercise to set goals for the self-talk you use during competition. Some example positive self-talk goals:

- » More consistently remind yourself how hard you've worked to get to this point in your development.
- » Work on improving your self-talk in certain situations (for example, the last minutes of the game or the first five minutes of the race).
- » Reverse your dominant negative thinking pattern. For example, if you know that you battle with perfectionism, set a goal to be more accepting of your own mistakes. Have a positive thought — such as “easy does it” or “trust my training” or “just be an athlete” — ready to go, so when you find yourself being a perfectionist, you can remind yourself to take it easy. You can even write the phrase on a piece of athletic tape wrapped around your wrist, as a constant reminder.

Write down these goals before you practice or compete, and then refer to them after you're done practicing or competing. Grade yourself on your ability to achieve your goals for that practice or competition. How well did you do? What can you do better? How will you improve next time? Evaluating your self-talk allows you to make changes quicker and develop better discipline in achieving your goals.

Coming up with cue words, mental anchors, and mantras

Develop specific *cue words* — words that will enable you to remain focused on staying positive and optimistic, such as *focus* or *hustle*. Write down some phrases as well, to help you remain positive during practice and games. Keep them short and simple. For example, phrases like *Keep going* and *I can do it!* are great to have in your mental toolbox. Some athletes prefer *Let's go!* or *Breathe*.

Cue words can be very effective tools for improving performance because they're quick reminders that help you regain focus. They help you get right back on task after moments in which you might've lost your cool or experienced a bad break or simply lost a big point. In the heat of battle, staying mentally focused can be difficult when your emotions are surging and you feel like screaming or yelling. Cue words can help you stay calm.

JOURNALING (AND PRACTICING) FOR PERFORMANCE

Performance journals can be a powerful tool in your sports psychology toolbox. As an athlete, you have so many aspects of your sport to focus on — everything from your nutrition and sleeping habits, to your training and technique. Using a journal can help you sort out the helpful from the non-helpful, and it can make a big difference in how effectively you practice and compete. Many of our clients have found that performance journals are a great way to organize their training and focus their efforts on techniques and strategies that help them compete better more consistently.

Your performance journal doesn't need to be anything fancy. A simple college-ruled spiral notebook will do. The important thing is that the journal should serve the purpose of tracking your performance statistics and observations.

After you've chosen a performance journal, be sure to use it! Here are some ways our clients have used their journals:

- To list daily practice goals and objectives
- To track opponents' strengths and weaknesses during competition
- To track moods and tendencies during competition
- To chart strategies for an upcoming practice or competition
- To list positive self-talk statements to use during practice or competition
- To recall an ideal mindset or mental and emotional template used when they compete at their best
- To note future improvements and adjustments to be made

The possibilities are endless, but the key is to use your journal in a way that helps you stay organized and on task — before, during, and after practice and competition. Start using your own version of a performance journal today, and you'll notice an improvement in your game!

Mental anchors can be described as images that help “anchor” you into a mood. An image such as a relaxed tiger ready to pounce can help anchor you into the right mood prior to competing, just as an image of a warm, sunny beach can anchor you into a relaxed state during breaks in competition. An anchor on a boat keeps the boat stable even if there is a large wake or high winds. The boat stays in place and is stable. In the same way, mental anchors keep your mind and body stable and grounded so that you can perform well.

Mantras are simply self-talk statements that you repeat before and during competition. Muhammad Ali was famous for his — “I am the greatest!” — and he would use it repeatedly before and during his boxing matches (to the dismay of his opponents). Mantras can be an easy way to pump yourself up or keep yourself relaxed during competition.



REMEMBER

Make sure to keep your cue words where you can see them. For example, write them on a piece of athletic tape wrapped around your wrist or on a piece of equipment, such as a glove, a wristband, or even your golf ball. Some athletes even write their cue words on their practice and competition clothing.

Creating a mental recovery routine

You’ll make mistakes in pretty much every practice or game — that’s a guarantee. So, you need to have a mental recovery routine in place so that you know what to do after you make a mistake. This routine can be as simple as using a cue word to help you bounce back from adversity (for example, you might tell yourself to relax or focus), or it can be as complicated as taking a minute between points in tennis to face the back fence, adjust your strings, and take several deep breaths. The key is to develop this routine before you need it in competition. Try using different cue words and different recovery routines in practice, and see which ones feel most comfortable (and effective) in the heat of the moment.

Some athletes also like to have a physical action to take in combination with their cue words. For example, golfers may pick up some blades of grass and gently toss them into the wind while saying their cue words as a way to let go of the mistake. Batters may gently toss dirt after striking out, and goalies may walk away from the goal for a few seconds. Simply snapping your fingers or taking a couple of hops can help you let go. Choose an action that works for you and allows you to move on when you make a mistake.

Mental recovery routines are like parachutes — they slow things down and allow you to hit the ground gently after tough moments in competition. You need to have both a quick routine (something like a cue word) and a more comprehensive routine (taking a time out, taking a bathroom break, and so on). Your performance journal can help you track which mental recovery routines work and which ones don’t, so your development in this area can be more deliberate.



TIP

A great tool to practice is what Todd calls the *ideal performance chart*. In this chart, athletes pick challenging situations and describe how they “react” to them (in this case, a reaction is more negative, such as using negative criticism, and then they write about how they want to “respond,” in a positive way). This enables you to plan ahead and consciously know how you want to respond. You may not do it every time, but the more you practice, the better you get!



REMEMBER

Your self-talk has a direct influence on your mental performance. It can improve your confidence, focus, and composure. Here are some examples of positive self-talk statements that you can use throughout your practice and competitions as a part of your mental recovery routine:

- » **When you need confidence:** "I can do it!" "I've done this hundreds of times before."
- » **When you're trying to focus:** "Just this task." "Next shot." "Next play."
- » **When you're trying to maintain your composure:** "Go easy." "Relax." "Deep breaths."
- » **When you need to put in extra effort:** "No fear!" "Never give up!" "Keep moving!"



REMEMBER

These aren't the only cue words or phrases. We encourage you to come up with some versions of your own.

Practicing effective imagery to improve self-talk

Imagery (Tool #2, covered in greater detail in Chapter 7) can help you plan and improve on your positive thoughts. Take time to close your eyes, relax, and imagine the positive thoughts that will run through your mind while competing. Here are some good times for practicing positive imagery:

- » Before practice (on your way to practice, after getting dressed in the locker room, and so on)
- » After practice (while showering, getting dressed, driving home, and so on)
- » Before bed (in those few moments where you're mentally winding down from your day)
- » After waking (in those few moments prior to jumping into the chaos of your morning)

When you practice positive imagery to improve your self-talk, you create a template in your mind for what you want to happen in the critical moments of competition. You can practice helpful responses to emotionally challenging moments during competition. The better and more often you practice this skill, the better and more often you can use it during competition.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding how routines affect performance
- » Seeing how routines surpass superstitions
- » Drawing inspiration from the routines of elite athletes
- » Establishing your own practice and game-day routines
- » Changing your routines when they aren't working for you

Chapter 9

Tool #4: Winning Habits: How Routines Improve Performance in Competition

A *routine* is a well-planned course of thoughts and actions that enables an athlete to focus and perform better, almost automatically. When you have solid routines, you can stop thinking and just play, letting your body do what you've trained it to do. Routines eliminate distractions — whether you're an elite athlete dealing with the media or a high school athlete juggling academics.

You probably have routines that you engage in before competition, but you may never have thought about why you even have them, and you may not engage in routines before practice. In order to establish the most effective routines, you

need to understand why routines are important. And you need to set routines for practices, not just games. How you practice truly is how you perform — if you don't have practice routines, you won't focus as well as you could, you won't get as much out of practice as you could, and you won't do as well in games as you could. If your routine allows your focus to be somewhere between 90–100 percent, you will perform that way. If you do not have routines and your focus drops to 70 percent, that is how you will perform. You obviously want routines.



REMEMBER

There is no such thing as a “good” or “bad” routine, or a “right” or “wrong” routine. Instead, some routines are simply more effective than others. In this chapter, we help you establish *effective* routines, because they help you to perform at higher levels consistently. Sometimes it is helpful to think about a routine like a funnel. When a ball goes into a funnel, it blocks out everything else and will come out the bottom every single time. Routines can be like this funnel. They keep you performing in a highly consistent way.

We start this chapter by explaining how routines improve focus and, consequently, performance. Then we outline the difference between routines and superstitions. (Here's a hint: Routines are effective, and superstitions aren't.) We give you some sample routines of elite athletes, so you can see what goes into an effective routine. Then we help you establish your own effective routines, both for practice and competition. We end the chapter by explaining when you might need to adjust your routines and tell you how to do so.

CHAMPION HABITS

The greatest athletes in the world have achieved that status because of their habits. They do things differently, and more consistently, than other athletes do. Across all sports and across all levels of competition, top athletes and competitors are different. Here's how:

- **They're more dedicated to their sports in the off season.** Top athletes at all levels are easily distinguished by their dedication to their sports in the off season. They spend more time working out when it's not required, and they put in more time than their competitors do on skill development and development of their minds regardless of their current skill level. Larry Bird used to show up at his high school gym early in the morning, hours before school started, to shoot free throws. As a star in the NBA, he also was the first one out on the court to warm up, hours before tipoff. Top athletes in every sport do the same thing. They have an insatiable need to develop their talent to the best of their abilities.
- **They master the fundamentals.** Even though fundamentals are typically seen as boring aspects of the sport, top athletes learn that the quickest way to success is to

master the fundamentals of their sports. By mastering the basics, they improve their execution and do better statistically at the basic skills of their sports, whether it's free-throw shooting in basketball, foot spacing in basketball, or tackling form in football. The more they work on their fundamental skills, the more automatic those skills become, and the better they perform overall.

- **They work harder.** Supreme competitors love to work hard. Whether they're motivated by the fear of losing or the love of winning, top athletes simply put in more time and at higher levels of intensity than their competitors do.
- **They tolerate pain and distress better.** Working hard isn't enough for top athletes, and it frequently leads to higher levels of physical pain and discomfort. Top athletes are able to tolerate this pain and discomfort better than regular athletes. They master the art of dissociating, or focusing on external factors such as family, long-term success, or pride when things get tough. Champions in every sport, and at every level, tolerate the pain inherent in their sport at higher levels than their competitors do.
- **They despise losing.** An easily seen trait of champions everywhere is the obvious trait of hating to lose. Top athletes despise losing — not only at their sports, but at anything. They can't fathom that someone else can be better than they are at their sports.
- **They prioritize better.** Priorities make champions. Top athletes do a better job of not only setting priorities, but pursuing those priorities as well. Whereas mediocre athletes may pursue their priorities from time to time, champions show a single-mindedness that is second to none when it comes to pursuing their priorities. Dan Gable, the greatest wrestler of all time, used to run to class in college with ankle weights on as a way of further distancing himself physically and aerobically from his opponents.
- **They set higher goals.** Whereas most athletes are content with being good at their sports, top athletes and world champions are not. They don't seek to win. They seek to dominate, and to do so in a fashion that leaves no doubt in anyone's mind who the better competitor is.
- **They pay attention to details.** Great athletes pay attention to details in many areas. They focus on diet, sleep, lifestyle, workout routines, mental training and skill mastery. They watch film tirelessly. They spend lots of time learning about their sport, down to the minutest of details. They're always looking for any type of an edge. In this case, working the mind and practicing the mental skills discussed in this book is an example of the details.
- **They have grit and are resilient.** In sports and life, you are going to have hard times, make mistakes, experience failure, and sometimes not get what you want or reach your goals. Champions continue to practice resilience or grit or mental toughness. This means they have the courage to keep battling to get better regardless of the hurdles along the way. They are committed to reaching their potential and are dedicated to overcoming the inevitable challenges they face.

Identifying How Routines Improve Focus and Performance

One of the primary roles of routines is to help you become more focused so that you can perform well in both practice and competition. Effective routines allow you to keep your mind on the tasks in front of you and not become distracted by all the irrelevant things around you.

Think of a funnel with a ball in it — the funnel represents your routines, and the ball represents your focus. At the top of the funnel is the beginning of a pre-performance routine. It includes the thoughts or behaviors you implement as you start getting ready for performance (whether that's in a practice or a game) — for example, showing up at the locker room at a certain time, beginning to listen to music on your phone, or getting dressed in a specific manner. As the practice or competition gets closer, you engage in additional routines — for example, the way you warm up — and your focus starts to narrow. At the base of the funnel, the ball drops through the narrowest part of the funnel, and this represents practice or game time. Your focus gets narrower and narrower as practice or game time approaches. There is no veering off course. In the funnel, the ball will eventually roll into the bottom. Similarly, once you begin your routines, your focus remains where it needs to be and doesn't wander.

Here's an example: Say you're a football player and you have two hours in the locker room before kickoff. You need to stay focused for that entire time, and your focus needs to get sharper and sharper as game time approaches. Your routines allow you to do this. The first thing you do when you arrive at the locker room is see the trainer to get taped. After taping, you take your time getting your pads on — you don't want to be rushed. Then you might put your headphones on and listen to a few songs that get you pumped up. Your team will also have a routine — such as the coach coming out about ten minutes before going on the field to go over last-minute reminders and provide a pre-game pep talk — so you need to make the team's routines part of your own. All these routines help to keep your focus where it needs to be before the game.

Without a set routine, the hours before the game would be a random series of events, and your focus would be unpredictable. You could walk into the locker room and talk with other players, hang out with trainers, or get distracted by other people in the locker room, losing sight of how close game time is. Your routines guard you against being distracted or negatively affected by distractions. Your routines prevent other things from entering your mind.

Routines are also very helpful for keeping you out of your head. Whenever athletes at any level talk about and describe great performance, it never involves thinking! By the time competition or practices comes around, your routines help you to stay in your heart and body and let your skill come out. Perfectionism and overthinking are very common among athletes and routines are a way to prevent and/or protect against these possible negative habits.



REMEMBER

Routines don't *guarantee* that you won't get distracted, but they dramatically increase the likelihood that you'll be focused and ready for performance. At game time, your skills and fitness levels are set. The only piece of the puzzle that hasn't been determined is your mindset. Routines are the key factor in finalizing your mental readiness.

Recognizing the Difference between Routines and Superstitions

You may have heard of an athlete wearing the same socks they wore the day before if they played well, or another athlete eating the same meal before each and every meet. These behaviors may seem like routines, but they're more than likely superstitions.

So, what's the difference between routines and superstitions? Routines are consistent, not compulsive, and they're geared toward improving focus. They have nothing to do with luck. Superstitious actions are used to help athletes feel more comfortable, and they have little to do with focus. Instead, they're all about luck — a lucky pair of socks, a lucky meal.

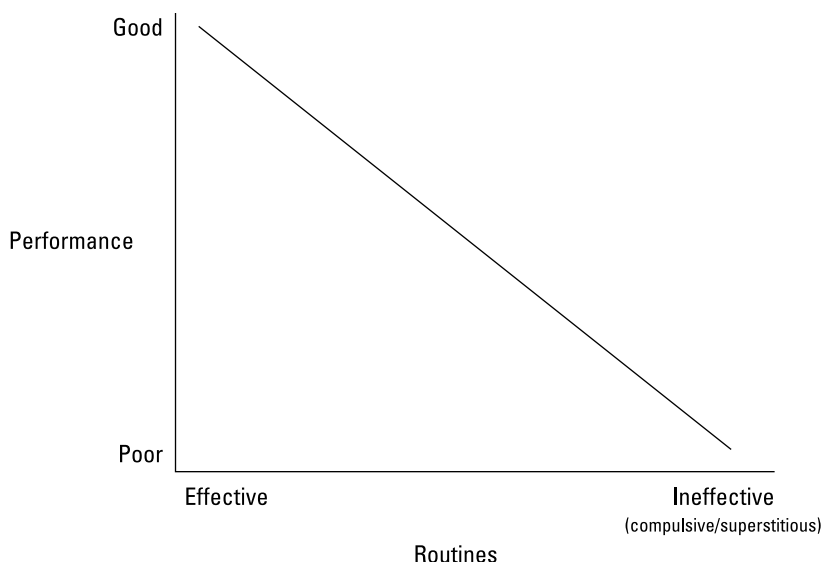
Routines are effective and help improve focus and performance. But, if your routines start becoming *compulsive* (where you feel like you have to do everything exactly the same way, no matter what), then your center of focus is starting to shift from your athletic performance and onto your routines (see Figure 9-1). Your compulsions can become superstitions where you believe that a certain behavior must be performed in a very specific and rigid way in order for you to play well. Your focus is then entirely on the superstition, completely distracting you from mentally preparing for competition.



REMEMBER

Routines are helpful, flexible, and effective. Compulsions are rigid and ineffective.

FIGURE 9-1: Performance is at its best when you follow routines and you're not a slave to superstitions.



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ANECDOTE

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE, BUT NOT A DROP TO DRINK

Andrew, a professional goalie, had finally reached the top of his sport. He'd been the starter on the team for two years in a row. At the start of his third season, however, he had a few shaky games, and he knew the coaches had noticed. Andrew was determined to address all facets of his athletic performance. He came to Todd because he thought that he needed to sharpen his routines — he felt like he'd become a little lax about them lately.

But what Andrew didn't realize was that he'd actually begun to become more *rigid* in his routines. For example, one of his routines was getting a fresh water bottle out of the ice bin right after the national anthem was played. In one game, he ran over to grab his water bottle, as part of his usual routine, but this time, someone *handed* him the water bottle. He ran out onto the field and felt uncomfortable. He kept thinking to himself that he needed to get his *own* water bottle out of the bin. He described not being able to let go of this thought the entire first half of the game. He ended up letting in a goal, which he blamed on a lack of focus.

The pressure Andrew was feeling was causing him to become compulsive and superstitious and had gone beyond a routine — and it was negatively affecting his performance. Todd explained that routines are consistent. Getting fresh water before going out onto field was effective, but that routine becomes ineffective if the water has to be from the

ice bin. What would he do when he was playing on the road? What if there were no ice bin? What if it wasn't the same brand of water? What if they only have cups of water, not bottles? He soon began to learn the difference between consistent routines and compulsive behaviors.

Make sure that your own routines are flexible enough that they don't hinder your performance if things don't go according to plan. Routines are all about improving your focus on the task at hand. When you start thinking more about the routine itself than about how you'll perform in practice or competition, you know you've veered off into the land of superstition.

Exploring the Routines of Elite Athletes

Every athlete is unique, and every athlete will develop their own routines. But you can learn from other athletes' routines — picking and choosing parts of those routines that you think would work for you. In this section, we give you three examples of routines from professional athletes we've worked with. Use these to get a sense of the traits of an effective routine and feel free to modify these to make them work for you.

Example #1: First on the field

John, a professional soccer player, begins training when he leaves home in the morning. On the drive in to practice, he thinks about what he wants to accomplish during training that day. He narrows his focus to two or three key objectives so that his training is sharp and purposeful. He also arrives at least an hour before the start of training so that he has plenty of time to get taped, as well as be mentally alert.

After he's been taped and has worked with the trainer, he gets his equipment on. As he's putting on his equipment, John is thinking more about his objectives while visualizing himself accomplishing them. He spends a few minutes joking and chatting with teammates before he heads out onto the field. He goes out on the field about 15 minutes before training starts — in fact, John is usually the first player on the field. Getting out on the field early helps him to feel more relaxed and focused.

This consistent method of preparation helps him get the most out of his practices. He knows that if he practices with intensity and focus, he'll be able to perform with intensity and focus.

For games, John again arrives at the stadium early, about 90 minutes before game time. He likes to be in the locker room when there are few people there. He takes this time to start getting his equipment ready and meet with the athletic trainer.

As in practice, John is one of the first players out on the field. He likes to take his time warming up. He goes through his own personal warm-up and then has the goalie coach or backup goalie strike some balls at him from various positions and directions on the field. Then he's ready to join the rest of the team for the team warm-up.

After the team warm-up, John returns to the locker room, takes a quick shower, and gets his game uniform on. By this time, many of the other players are back in the locker room and the final team preparations are being made. John is typically one of the players who's trying to get the energy up among other players, as a way to keep his own excitement in check. He also likes to be the last one out of the locker room. He slaps the hands of every player heading out of the locker room onto the field before he leaves the locker room himself.

Example #2: Leisurely and relaxed

Lori, a professional tennis player, takes a relaxed approach to getting ready for practice. She gets up early to eat breakfast and stretch, without feeling hurried.

She likes to be mentally clear and focused on her objectives. Before she leaves for practice, she writes in her journal, addressing specific objectives she wants to accomplish in practice that day. She also makes sure to discuss these objectives with her coach before training begins. Her coach discusses his own objectives, as well as the plan for how they'll accomplish these objectives. Lori is better able to relax when she and her coach are on the same page before practice.

After each practice, Lori and her coach review their objectives and evaluate their success. Lori writes in her mental training journal, highlighting and evaluating various mental strengths and weaknesses, how well she accomplished her objectives, and any other important miscellaneous notes.

Before a tournament, Lori likes to arrive at the location at least two days ahead of time, if possible. She likes to stay very close to the venue, preferably within walking distance. (She knows that she doesn't want to have to worry about traffic and getting to the venue on time.)

Lori likes to take a leisurely and relaxed approach before her first match. Two days before the first match, she does her fitness training. The day before that first match, she plays with a designated hitting partner in the morning and then does some light fitness in the afternoon. She finds out the exact time of her match and,

if she can, scouts her opponent. The night before the match, she eats a healthy, nutritious dinner. She prefers to eat in her hotel and not go outside of the hotel the night before a match.

Lori gets plenty of sleep and gets up in the morning in time to eat a light breakfast and arrive at the venue well before match time. She hits with a hitting partner and then gets a stretch from her coach or massage therapist. Then she goes onto the court for her match. While waiting at the court, she has her headphones on, listening to music and blocking out all other distractions.

Example #3: Movies and meditation

A professional golfer, Kevin has been on the mini-tour for 18 months. Because he has the tendency to overthink and worry about performance, effective routines are very important. He begins his routine the day before the first day of the tournament. He gets off the golf course by 2 p.m. that day, because he knows that being relaxed is more critical than getting more practice.

The night before the tournament begins, Kevin hangs out in his hotel room. He may do a cardio workout. Then he eats dinner around 6 p.m. After dinner, he goes back to the hotel and watches a movie. This helps him relax and get his mind off of golf. Kevin is a very spiritual person, so he also spends time in prayer and meditation as part of his routine the night before the tournament begins.

On the morning of the tournament, Kevin starts with a healthy breakfast and arrives at the course at least an hour ahead of time. He doesn't want to be rushed. He has a set routine that he goes through on the range. He plays the first three holes of the course on the range, which helps him to warm up physically as well as mentally.

Then Kevin proceeds to the short-game area to get his feel with putting and chipping from various distances. He makes sure to remain calm and centered. He goes over his mental reminders for the day and sees himself blasting his tee shot down the middle of the fairway.

Coming Up with Effective Practice and Game-Day Routines

You already have routines (whether you're aware of them or not), because you engage in certain behaviors and thoughts before practices and games. In this section, we walk you through developing effective routines. You can fine-tune your existing routines, too — you don't have to reinvent the wheel.



REMEMBER

The importance of routines brings to light the importance of mentally warming up. It is our belief that coaches should set aside the first and last 10 minutes of practice for mental warm-up and mental cool-down. Most coaches, however, feel they need time for skill practice (even though they say that most of the errors by their athletes are mental ones). If they even discuss this type of warm-up, they expect athletes to do it on their own before and after practice. You warm up your body and skill, so why not your mind, especially since most errors are mental errors?



ANECDOTE

Todd was working with a college soccer team. He emphasized to the coach that her players were failing because of mental weaknesses and errors, not due to deficiencies in skill or coaching. Todd encouraged the coach to include mental warm-ups and cool-downs as part of practices, not extra things that players needed to do on their own. The coach resisted for a year, but then was in a position that if she did not improve the team record, she was going on the chopping block to be fired. She then added mental warm-ups as part of practice. That year, the team moved up four spots in the conference. Her job was saved. The second year, they tied for the conference championship. The third year, they made it to the Final Four. It is not to say that the mental warm-up and cool-down were responsible for all the success, but the coach still states today that focusing on mental preparation made the biggest difference.



REMEMBER

Routines aren't carved in stone. You'll want to evaluate your routines periodically and adjust them as you go, from one practice or competition to the next, and from one season to the next.

Practice routines

Effective practice routines can make or break your performance, no matter what your sport. But the truth is, most athletes we've worked with have no real practice routines when they first come to see us. Creating effective practice routines is something that most athletes can improve on in their performance plan. After all, how you practice is how you perform. In this section, we offer our recommendations for establishing your own practice routines.

Before practice

When it comes to establishing practice routines, there are three times you need to pay attention to: the night before, the morning of, and the hour before practice. We cover each in the following sections.

Coaches hold practices at different times of the day — morning, afternoon, evening. But regardless of what time your practice is, these time periods still apply!

THE NIGHT BEFORE PRACTICE

The night before practice is when you should be focusing on

» **Technical planning:** Technical planning is all about what you'll be facing in the upcoming practice, and what you need to do to be prepared for it. For example, will you be facing a hard-hitting football practice in 85-degree heat? Or will you be facing a shorter, less-intense practice? How will you get better in the next practice? What will your mindset be?

You don't need to call your coach to get this information — just answer the following questions:

- Do I have all my equipment ready? Do I need to pick up, repair, or wash anything?
- How will I get better skill-wise tomorrow? What's my purpose for practice?
- What mindset will I have throughout practice? What can I improve on mentally?
- Are there any potential distractions I need to address tonight?

When you know what lies ahead, you'll have a more productive and more focused practice. A more focused and high-quality practice translates to higher-quality and more consistent performances.

» **Nutrition:** The night before practice, you're fueling your body for the next day. As an athlete, you need a basic understanding of the necessary fuel or nutrition for your body, such as the importance of complex carbohydrates, and the difference between healthy and unhealthy fats. For more information, check out *Nutrition For Dummies*, 7th Edition, by Carol Ann Rinzler.

» **Sleep:** You also want to make sure you are getting adequate and quality sleep. A tired body translates to a tired mind and then mental mistakes occur more often.

THE MORNING OF PRACTICE

Your morning routine doesn't need to be very elaborate, but it should be consistent.

Make sure that you eat a healthy breakfast every morning. In fact, the worst thing you can do is miss breakfast, because it puts your body into starvation mode and slows your metabolism. Eating a healthy breakfast will ensure that your body has the nutrients required to meet the demands of the day, as well as the coming practice.

In addition to a healthy breakfast, your morning routine should include preparation for practice. Make sure you have all the gear you need for practice. Spend some time thinking about your objectives for practice, and write down a cue word or phrase that will remind you of them. You can also take a few minutes to visualize yourself successfully achieving your goals in practice. A little forethought goes a long way toward making sure you're ready to go come practice time. You may have many other things going on during the day, such as classes, so making sure you have some mental prep in the morning can be extremely helpful.

THE HOUR BEFORE PRACTICE

One hour before practice, hydrate your body — drink at least 8 to 16 ounces of water (more if you'll be practicing in hot weather, for a long time, or at a high level of intensity).

You may want to listen to music — either relaxing music to calm your nerves or energetic music to get you pumped up and ready to roll. Or you may want to read your performance journal (see Chapter 12) and make adjustments for the upcoming practice. If you'd rather not listen to music or review your journal, you may want to simply meditate or even hang out with your teammates. The activity you choose will depend on your personality, but the key is to choose the activity that gets you ready to perform in practice.

You are using this time to get your mind ready — this is your mental warm-up. At this point, your skill and fitness levels are set. What determines the success and quality of your practice is your mindset. Know what your ideal mindset is (see Chapter 2) and use this hour to make sure you are in that mindset.

During practice

Just as important as pre-practice routines are those routines that you perform during practice. The purpose of in-practice routines is to help you pump yourself up, calm yourself down, or focus yourself — quickly. Here are some examples of during-practice routines:

- » Practicing free throws without the basketball
- » Using cue words to calm yourself during breaks in the action
- » Putting from increasing lengths, starting at 2 feet and moving out to 20 feet
- » Shadow wrestling
- » Using mental imagery when waiting in the on-deck circle
- » Thinking about new goals when going from drilling to playing for points

- » Looking at cue words or objectives in your journal when there is a break in the action
- » Pulling off to the side and taking some deep breaths when you're struggling in practice
- » Running through mind and body scans, where you tune in to your body and mind and see if they are in the place you desire for top-quality practice

In-practice routines need to be short and sweet — they may even be only 5 to 10 seconds in length. Just make sure that you have at least one routine to pump yourself up, one to calm yourself down, one to get yourself focused, and one to handle adversity and bounce back from mistakes. You should be able to use these routines at any given moment during practice to get you back into the proper emotional state to perform at your peak level.

After practice

Post-practice routines are, in our estimation, the most neglected aspect of athletic competition. Most athletes think their work is done when practice is over. But you still have some work to do, especially if you want to get a distinct edge over your competitors.

Post-practice routines have two specific purposes:

- » To cool you down
- » To gather and collect important information for the next practice or game

Make sure that you evaluate your objectives and your progress in accomplishing those objectives after practice. Try to do so as soon after practice as possible, when your memory is fresh. If you put it off until later, you're more likely to forget important details or skip the evaluation altogether.



TIP

Here are some things to write about in your journal after practice:

- » Did you accomplish your objectives? Why or why not?
- » Describe your mental game. Was it effective? Was it where you wanted to be?
- » What are your goals for tomorrow's practice?
- » Did you notice anything today that you need to bring up with your coach, trainer, or sports psychologist?

- » Chapter 8 mentioned the “3-2-1” method. This is great to do after practice and competitions. Select and journal three things you did really well, two things the practice taught you about yourself or your sport, and one thing you are going to do in the next 24 hours to get better.

Simply put, athletes who journal get better faster. Yes, it takes discipline, but it just might become one of the mental drills you look most forward to doing. When you are keeping on top of what you are doing well and what you need to improve on a consistent basis, you get better faster.



TIP

You may want to listen to calming music while recording your thoughts about practice in your performance journal.

Game-readiness routines

Establishing a game-day routine is one key to performing your best. Similar to practice, there are three time periods you need to focus on: before the game, during the game, and after the game. We cover each of these in the following sections.



REMEMBER

Routines prepare your mind and body for competition. They send a message to your brain that you’ve been here before and that you’re comfortable and ready to go.

Before competition

Just as with your pre-practice routines, your pre-competition routines need to be set up for maximum effectiveness. Specifically, you want your routines to set your mind and body on autopilot.



TIP

Here are some common examples of what athletes may do before a game:

- » Arrive at the competition site at a certain time (earlier is better).
- » Visualize on your way to the game (especially during road games or competitions).
- » Listen to preselected music or playlists while in the locker room.
- » Read final cue word or mantra reminders that you’ve stashed in your locker or brought in your gym bag.
- » Get a massage or chiropractic adjustment to prepare your body for competition.

- » Warm up for a set period of time, in the same way, before every game.
- » Spend time socializing with other players (this usually works better for extraverted types and is really helpful for overthinkers).

Make a list of three to five thoughts and behaviors you believe help you get prepared for competition. There are no right or wrong answers here — your goal is to choose thoughts and behaviors that you think will be best for you. They are things you do, think, or say that help you feel ready to compete at your best. This is a great time to look back at and/or create your mental anchors (Chapter 8).

Remember the night before competition as well. Many times we encourage athletes to let go and relax at least 12–24 hours before competition. Your skill and fitness are set at that point. The only thing left to do is fuel, sleep, and relax. The best thing you can do is find ways to relax. For some, this might be hanging with teammates or friends, for others it might be watching a movie and relaxing by themselves. There are no right or wrongs, but just have your plans of how you will relax the night before competition.



REMEMBER

Your routine isn't carved in stone — you can and should adjust it over time. So don't pressure yourself to find the "perfect" routine right now. You may try some things, move on to others, and stick with still others. (For more on changing your routines, check out "Knowing When and How to Adjust Your Routines.")

During competition

You probably already use some routines during competition — maybe without even knowing it. The routines you use during competition help you focus and relax. Here are some examples of in-game routines:

- » What a basketball player does before shooting a free throw
- » What a soccer player does before making a free kick
- » What a football player does before each and every play
- » What a field-goal kicker does before going onto the field

In-game routines are habits that help you stay relaxed and focused on the task at hand.

Basketball players always have some sort of routine before shooting a free throw — taking a deep breath, dribbling a certain number of times, and then bending at the knees. A tennis player bounces the ball a certain number of times before tossing it for a serve. Baseball players may adjust their gloves or take a

certain number of practice swings before stepping up to the plate. Athletes have all different versions of these routines. The key is that you have a routine to help you feel focused and confident before executing a skill.

You also want to have routines when there are natural breaks in the action, such as at halftime or between quarters. You can develop certain habits to make sure that you're mentally ready when play resumes. Some athletes pull out their journals and take a quick glance to make sure they're doing what they planned. Others get a bite to eat or fuel up on sports drinks. Top athletes use this time to remind themselves to stay committed to their game plan.

Post-game routines

If you don't have a post-game routine, you don't learn from the competition — win or lose. That can be a big waste of time and an ineffective way to go about competing. It can be as simple as writing a few notes in your journal or speaking some brief words onto your smart phone, but the importance point is that you do something. Some athletes even have a ritual they go through where they let go of the practice or game and move forward, win or lose. But the key is to review (no judgment) as soon after the game as possible, with details are clear and refresh. The athletes who do this get better faster.



REMEMBER

You may reflect on a loss and what went wrong, but learning from wins is just as important. You need to take time to think about what made you successful so you can repeat your success the next time you compete. Plus, even if you won, you probably weren't perfect — you can still find mistakes to learn from, even in a win.

In the following sections, we give you a couple ideas for post-game routines.

Focusing on fitness

Even though athletes depend on their bodies as one of the most critical components to their success, many of them don't have a post-competition cool-down or stretching routine. You need to have some sort of a routine in which you take care of your body after a competition. After all, you've probably just pushed your body to its limits — now you need to take care of it. You can do so by stretching or getting a massage. Win or lose, treating your body right is an important post-game routine. The more confidence you have in your body, the more confidence you will have in your sport.

Journaling

After each game, write in your training journal about what you did well and what you need to improve upon based on that competition. The sooner you can do this after the game, the better, so it's fresh in your memory — shoot for journaling within one hour of the game.



TIP

Try to have some structure for your journal entries to make sure you aren't forgetting anything. Feel free to implement the “3-2-1” method discussed in Chapter 8. Here are some questions and issues to consider:

- » Make note of relevant statistics — the final score, your win/loss record, stats important to your sport.
- » Did you accomplish your specific objectives? If so, what made that possible? If not, what got in the way?
- » Describe your mental game. Was it effective? Was it where you wanted to be?
- » Assess your mental “stats” — how relaxed you were, how focused you were, how confident you were, and so on. Determine which “stats” are most important to you and your sport, and rate them on scale of 1 to 5.
- » What did you learn from today's competition?
- » Did you notice anything today that you need to bring up with your coach, trainer, or sports psychologist?
- » What will you do differently in the next competition?

Knowing When and How to Adjust Your Routines

In order to make your routines successful, you need to regularly measure their effectiveness. The easiest metric or method for doing that is your comfort level while competing. If you're feeling comfortable and excited to compete, your routines are serving you well. If you're feeling uncomfortable or inconsistent in your performance, then you may need to adjust your routines a bit. You also need to evaluate your routines for effectiveness. Is your performance improving? Are you competing at a higher level? If so, your routines can take some credit. If not, your routines may be one reason, and adjustments can help.



TIP

Here are some signs that you need to adjust your routines:

- » You're slow to start in competitions.
- » You start out too fast and tire out too quickly.
- » When you make mistakes, you take a long time (or at least longer than you'd like) to recover from them.
- » You feel like you're giving away points or strokes or otherwise making errors.
- » You aren't happy while competing, or you're just generally dissatisfied.
- » You lack motivation.
- » You perform differently at home and on the road.
- » Your energy levels and/or mindset are not where you need or what them to be.



TIP

If you're having trouble telling how well you're doing, you can ask coaches, teammates, family, or friends what they're seeing. You may also want to videotape yourself and review the tapes.

If you've determined that your routines aren't as effective as they could be, you can make a change. Drastic changes to routines usually aren't necessary — they can actually do more harm than good. But simple and subtle changes can help. For example, you may want to try showing up earlier to practice or a competition to not feel so rushed, or you may want to make certain there is some structure to your time before practice or games (by journaling or listening to music, for example).

Modifying your routines

If you determine that changing up your routines is going to be helpful, begin the process. Just try one or two simple things at first and then go from there. Consider the best timing for your routines (such as the night before) and make adjustments.

Figure out what it is about your performance or mindset that is not optimal and work your way backward. For example, if you compete early in the morning and have noticed that you are slower at getting your mind and body alert, change the time you get up, even just 15 minutes earlier can help. Or it might help to get a quick jog in or spend 15 minutes on the stationary bike before the actual competition.

Be sure you understand what you are trying to change and then adjust your routines accordingly. Here are some additional examples:

- » **You notice you are too nervous right before game time:** Adjust your routines a few hours before game time. Try listening to relaxing music doing something non-sport related so you do not think about the game.
- » **You notice you get too nervous the night before a game:** Develop routines that help you relax. Some athletes find it helpful to completely distract themselves from the upcoming competition. All training is done at this point anyway. Thus, they hang out with friends or watch movies or do homework. Other athletes, on the other hand, like to practice imagery and journaling as a way to help them feel more comfortable before they shut everything down for the evening.

The key is to figure out what is getting in the way of your performance, then adjust your routines to put your mind and heart in the place you desire.

Learning great routines from others (and making them your own)

One effective way to develop better routines as an athlete and competitor is to borrow them from other successful athletes! There's no rule that says you can't copy another person's routine, after all, and maybe your favorite athlete has one that works really well. Why not try it? Feel free to make adjustments to that routine, to make it work *for you*. You can also read about great athletes' routines online or email or text athletes and coaches you respect for ideas.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding what pressure is and where it comes from
- » Training your mind not to feel pressure
- » Distinguishing between pressure and arousal
- » Exploring strategies for coping with pressure

Chapter **10**

Tool #5: Handling Pressure: Playing with Fire without Getting Burned

You can't guarantee much when it comes to sports, but you can guarantee the presence of pressure. Pressure, or should we say the perception of pressure, is one of the great roadblocks to performance that we see in the athletes we work with. Whether team or individual; high school, college, or pro; sports are full of pressure, and the best athletes are the ones who perform well under it. You know the type — the quarterback who throws a game-winning touchdown with 30 seconds left in the Super Bowl; the golfer who birdies the 18th hole for a U.S. Open win; the tennis player who wins two sets in a row after being a set down to win Wimbledon. What the best athletes have in common is their ability to perform their best when the pressure is at its greatest.

Handling pressure effectively isn't something that only the pros can do. Regardless of where you are in your athletic career, you can learn to respond well under pressure, and in this chapter, we show you how. We start by explaining what pressure is and how it differs from arousal. Then we give you some simple ways to overcome pressure, regardless of the situation.

Probing into Pressure: What It Is and Why It Occurs

Pressure is simply the anxiety and nervousness you feel when faced with a certain stimulus or situation. Pressure *always* comes from within. Two people put into the same situation might respond differently — one might feel pressure where the other doesn't. That difference is what sets the great athletes apart from the good ones. When you realize and begin to understand that the skills to hit a first serve in tennis are the same in practice as they are when you are serving for the win in a real match, you begin to learn how your own mind works when creating that feeling of pressure.



REMEMBER

If you're experiencing and being negatively affected by pressure, *you* are the cause and *you* are the solution. This should make you feel good, since you know (and can control) the source of the problem!

IT'S A GROWN-UP'S WORLD

Babies and children don't feel pressure. Think about toddlers learning how to walk. Their minds are focused only on the task at hand: walking. Their mind isn't clouded with fears of failure, how they compare to other toddlers, or what their parents think of them. They simply want to walk, and they keep trying to walk no matter how many times they fall down and no matter how long it takes.

Now, consider how an adult might learn how to do something new. The adult mind tends to overanalyze and worry about failure ("What if I can't do this?"), as well as what other people think ("What are they saying about me?"). These thoughts create pressure, which, in turn, results in physical consequences (such as muscle tension, increased heart rate, increased adrenaline release, and knots in the stomach). You simply cannot perform to your ideal skills levels when your body is in this condition. You have the skill, but you cannot access it because of the tension throughout your body.

Next time you feel pressure, try to channel your 1-year-old self — or at least that part of yourself that didn't let pressure get in the way of accomplishment (or fun!).

The signs of pressure

Sometimes, when you're in the thick of an experience, it can be hard to tell if you're letting the pressure of the moment get to you. Certain telltale signs indicate that you're under pressure:

- » **Physical:** How your body feels. Here are some physical symptoms of pressure:
 - Shallow breathing
 - Increased heart rate
 - Increased perspiration
 - Restlessness
 - Muscle tension and tightness
 - Nausea
- » **Mental:** Your thoughts. Here are some mental symptoms of pressure:
 - Inability to focus
 - Thoughts of dread, worry, and failure
 - A racing mind
 - Worrying about how others will view your performance
 - Focusing on having to perform perfectly
 - Obsessing about poor performances in the past
- » **Emotional:** Your feelings. Here are some emotional symptoms of pressure:
 - Anxiety
 - Fear
 - Nervousness
 - Panic
 - Irritation
 - Stress
- » **Behavioral:** Your actions. Here are some behavioral symptoms of pressure:
 - Acting in a way that seems odd compared to your usual behavior
 - Hurrying
 - Fidgeting

- Having a tantrum
- Talking rapidly
- Skipping routines

The sooner you're able to recognize the signs of pressure, the sooner you can intervene and prevent them from causing problems in your performance. You also want to reflect and journal about pressure well before the season starts, so that you can recognize the signs and symptoms of pressure (for you as an athlete) and identify the way in which they affect you during competition.



If you allow the symptoms to continue, you'll need more time to get them under control. And at some point, it may be too late — you'll have made a mistake because of the pressure you were feeling.

What causes pressure in sports

Pressure is a part of life in general, but sports in particular can be pressure filled. You're out there, in front of a crowd, and all eyes are on you. Your coach may be yelling at you, your teammates are counting on you, and you start to feel the pressure to perform. Here are some other common causes of pressure in sports:

- » Feeling overwhelmed by the demands of being the most talented player on your team
- » Trying to prove yourself to a new coach or teammates
- » Having a family history of success in sports (a parent or sibling who is/was a good athlete)
- » Obsessing about whether your sports achievements will get you awards or fame
- » Not wanting to let family or friends down
- » Trying not to embarrass yourself in front of others, especially after a layoff from competition
- » Trying to make the travel team (or the varsity team)
- » Wanting more playing time on your current team
- » Low self-esteem or a sense that your identity is tied to whether you win or lose

Pressure can prevent you from performing at your best. Have you noticed that you perform better during practice than you do during games — scoring more goals, blocking more shots, or catching more balls? The skills you successfully use in practice are exactly the same as the ones you need to use during competition. *The only difference is in your mind.* Chances are, you don't worry about failure in practice as much as you do during a game, even though your mind can create pressure during practice. If those worries affect you when it comes time to perform in practice or games, you're feeling the impact of pressure.

Each person experiences pressure slightly differently — not only in terms of the situations that result in pressure but also in terms of his response to it. Regardless of what causes pressure for you, one thing remains true: You have control over pressure — whether you feel it and how you manage it.

Even the world's best athletes feel pressure. Consider this advice from some of the best:

- » Tiger Woods, when he was at the peak of his game, said, "I always feel pressure. If you don't feel nervous, that means you don't care about how you play. I care about how I perform. I've always said the day I'm not nervous about how I'm playing is the day I quit."
- » LeBron James has stated, "There is a lot of pressure put on me, but I don't put a lot of pressure on myself. I feel if I play my game, it will take care of itself."
- » U.S. soccer phenom Megan Rapinoe has stated, "If you can't take criticism, you can't reach your potential."
- » Hall of Fame quarterback and six-time Superbowl champion Tom Brady stated, "To anyone who feels left out or is afraid of trying their best for fear of failure, you're not alone. The magic you're looking for is in the will of trying and not giving up."
- » Olympic gymnast and gold-medal winner Shawn Johnson has said, "As for pressure, I feel it comes more from myself."
- » Hall of Fame quarterback John Elway said, "A lot of times the expectations of you are so high that no matter what you do, you are never going to live up to those expectations. So you better go out and do the best you can and enjoy it."

Simone Biles, multi-gold medalist in Olympic gymnastics, and Naomi Osaka, professional tennis player, have been open about the pressure they feel from media, fans, and spectators in regard to their athletic performance. The pressure as they both describe has been more problematic for them recently, and they are two of the most elite athletes in the world.



REMEMBER

You won't feel pressure if you don't overthink the situation — though that's easier said than done. That amazing brain of yours, with all its infinite capacity to solve problems and remember events that happened decades ago, can be your biggest enemy when it comes to competing in sports. Although your brain is a handy tool in the outside world, in sports your thoughts can get in the way.

Note that there is a difference between your mind and your brain. Your brain is simply an organ, in charge of running biological processes and manufacturing thoughts. Your mind is where thoughts are created. Your brain and mind work together, but it is important to recognize that your mind is something you can train.

Why some athletes choke under pressure

Choking is taking a simple task and overanalyzing it to the point that your performance on that particular task suffers. It's the behavior the results from overthinking a situation. Here are some examples of choking:

- » Striking out in the bottom of the ninth inning with runners on base
- » Double-faulting in tennis on a crucial point
- » Missing a field goal in the waning moments of a big football game
- » Missing a key free throw at the end of a basketball game
- » Shanking a shot off the tee in golf



REMEMBER

Even professional athletes aren't immune to choking. History is filled with examples of athletes succumbing to pressure and choking during critical moments of competition — for example, Scott Norwood missing a 47-yard field goal in the closing second of Super Bowl XXV, Greg Normal losing a six-stroke lead during a disastrous final round in the 1996 Masters, or the New York Yankees blowing a three-game lead in the 2004 American League playoffs. Examples are everywhere and will continue to occur as the years progress.

Choking is and always will be a part of athletic competition. It occurs every day in all sports and at all levels, from the professional leagues down to youth sports. If you participate in sports, you may face your own moment of choking. The better you get at dealing with pressure, however, the less likely you'll be to choke during competition.

Another way to view choking is simply performing below your skill level. Pressure causes athletes to do this frequently in sports. They succumb to pressure, but it may not be at a time when a game or performance is on the line. Many times athletes do not consider this choking, but performing below their skill level.



REMEMBER

Just about all athletes choke at some point in their athletic careers. And choking itself can lead to even more pressure. In fact, many times, managing the pressure that results from choking can be quite challenging. The next time you're on the field, your previous choke may run through your mind and lead to more pressure and another poor performance.

Pressure exists only in the mind

One of the most important mental points to realize is that pressure is always created in your mind. The good thing, then, is that you can train your mind to not feel pressure! This is what this book is all about — showing you ways to train and practice your mind so that pressure does not enter into the picture on a consistent basis. Now, if it were that easy, we would all have extremely high athletic performances and successful lives, so there has to be an aspect of continual work toward this sort of mindset.

We all have different personalities, experiences, and skills that can help us manage pressure in sports and in life. You may have grown up with a lot of experience handling pressure from a young age, whereas your teammate or friend may not have. Many athletes who come from difficult upbringings or environments learn how to handle pressure without even realizing it! All of these factors affect how athletes address, manage, and resolve pressure in sport.



TIP

It is therefore important to remind yourself and practice developing your own awareness that pressure comes from within. The particular situations you face are not stressful and pressure-filled in and of themselves. It comes down to how you perceive those situations that determines whether they feel stressful. If you develop the skills in practice, you can execute those same skills in competition — provided you have trained your mind to manage your perceived pressure.

There is a common saying in the martial arts world — where managing pressure can have actual real-life injury consequences if done poorly — in times of stress, we fall back on our highest level of training. Or, in other words, in times of stress, we revert to the coping methods we have learned.

Pressure is energy steered in an ineffective direction

Pressure is energy. If you think about physically pushing against a teammate to see who is stronger or simply pushing your hands together forcefully, the pressure you physically feel is energy being directed in a certain manner.

When you are overthinking or worrying about outcomes such as wins or losses, you are putting your mental energy into things that create this feeling of pressure, and this pressure in turn affects your body. The negative changes in your body prevent you from performing at your best. This pressure blocks your potential. You might not perform to your highest skill level.



ANECDOTE

Todd works with many golfers from all over the world and he sees how skilled they can be when he is walking with them on the course or at the range. He sees them shoot in the 60s and low 70s many times. But then, in the tournament or when qualifying, these same players shoot 5–10 strokes higher. Their skill level did not change. Their mindset did.

Leif once worked with an MMA athlete who was competing in the UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship), which is the highest level of MMA. This athlete was having a difficult time letting go of perceived expectations that others had of him. He was also hyper-focused on other issues outside of fighting, and these factors caused him to slip into a different, less-effective, mindset when fighting. As a result, he lost some fights he felt he should have won, which frustrated him and led to him seeking Leif as a resource to help change that pattern.

Understanding the Difference between Arousal and Pressure

You want to feel the heat of competition — in fact, a certain level of *arousal* (excitement) can actually improve your performance. It's only when you begin to overthink things and become too aroused (overexcited, fearful, worried, frustrated, etc.) that you start to feel *pressure*, and then your performance suffers.

Pressure negatively affects performance and is too high a state of arousal. Arousal is on a continuum — it can *positively* or *negatively* affect performance. Arousal is simply your body's physical and emotional reaction to your thoughts.

Pressure begins in the mind. It starts with negative or ineffective thoughts or thought patterns about your performance and then spreads to other things — your muscles become tense, your mind races, you experience worry and fear, and so on. For example, if you think of free throws as pressure-filled situations, odds are, you're focusing your thinking on the what ifs, such as "What if I miss this shot?" and "What if I let down my team?" Some players have no difficulties making free throws, while others struggle. Basketball players who have high free-throw percentages focus on form, stroke, and body alignment. They don't think of the situations as pressure filled, so they don't experience abnormally high levels of arousal.

Arousal is the physical reaction your body experiences during competition. Various measures of arousal include breathing rate, muscle tension or tightness, heart rate, thought control, and sweat levels. Notice the difference between the starters and bench players on a basketball team — you'll see that the starters are warmed up and ready to go at the beginning of the game, whereas bench players are less pumped up. This is simply because the starters have prepared their bodies for immediate action, whereas the bench players have not.

This is not helpful for the backup players because they need to be ready at any given moment. You may get your chance to be in the game unexpectedly, but then not perform well because you were not mentally ready. You may have been distracted or had lower levels of arousal because you did not think you were going to get in the game. What happens, then, is that athletes confirm what the coaches already thought — they were not ready to be in the starting lineup. We see these events all of the time — athletes complain they are not getting the playing time they desire, but then they are not ready to compete at their best when their moment comes!

Some physical indicators can tip you off as to whether you've achieved the ideal amount of arousal. Table 10-1 breaks down a number of different mental and physical states, showing how they vary depending on whether your arousal level is too low, ideal, or too high.

TABLE 10-1 **Distinguishing Low, Ideal, and High Arousal**

Physical or Mental State	Arousal/Activation Level		
	Too Low	Ideal	Too High
Breathing	Shallow breathing	Comfortable breathing	Hurried breathing
Muscle tension	Too relaxed	Relaxed but ready	Tight and tense
Mental state	Bored/burned out	Challenged	Fearful or scared
Motivation	Unmotivated	Motivated	Burned out
Nervousness	No butterflies in stomach	Some butterflies	Too many butterflies
Mental activity	No thoughts	Some thoughts	Racing thoughts

Being in the ideal arousal state means that you're more likely to get your best results. When you're not aroused enough, your body isn't ready to compete. An athlete in this position usually doesn't care about the upcoming competition, hasn't prepared well, and is generally not motivated to do well.

In the ideal arousal state, you're feeling motivated and excited, while at the same time relaxed and ready to go. You may have heard this referred to as being in "the zone." During an ideal arousal state, you are also not consciously thinking much and are instead letting your body react and perform as it has been trained.

Too much of a good thing, and performance begins to decline. When you're too aroused, you feel too much pressure and aren't able to manage it. You might feel scared, doubtful, worried, frustrated, angry, upset, or distracted, and your muscles become tight and tense, increasing the chance of poor performance. You may sweat excessively, have a rapid heart rate, and knots in your stomach, breathe shallowly and rapidly, and feel jittery, and your mind may be racing.

Here are some examples of athletes with varying levels of arousal:

- » **Low arousal and low performance:** Dawn is an 18-year-old college soccer player who has difficulty getting excited about practice or games. She's burned out because she's played soccer for 15 years and hasn't taken many breaks from the game. She comes into practice and games most of the time feeling unmotivated and lacking the drive to be her best or to perform for her team. Her performance is usually low because her arousal level is low.
- » **High arousal and low performance:** Rikard is a 12-year-old hockey goalie. He gets extremely anxious and feels tremendous pressure the night before games. He worries about letting in goals, his coach yelling at him, disappointing his teammates, and screwing up in front of others. He has difficulty sleeping, worries all day before the game, frequently has an upset stomach and shaky hands because of nerves, and even throws up once in a while before games because of the intensity of his anxiety. He plays with nervous energy, rapid heart rate, and weak leg muscles. He's exhausted at game time because of all the pressure he's been experiencing and hasn't been able to manage. His lack of focus, tight muscles, and tired body (because of pressure) cause him to let in goals that he would normally have stopped in practice. In fact, in practice, he's very talented — he just can't perform the same way in games. Pressure has created very high arousal levels for Rikard, and a resulting poor performance.
- » **Ideal arousal and optimal performance:** Laura is a professional tennis player and has become aware of her ideal mental and emotional state. She describes herself as excited, positive, and focused on only the things she can control — her tennis, not her opponent's. Sometimes she gets anxious about whether she'll win, but she uses a variety of strategies to keep herself in a mental space of comfort and confidence. She believes in her ability and also is

able to think about other things besides tennis. She notices that her muscles are relaxed and ready to go, her mind is clear, and she's enjoying the people around her as she gets ready to compete. She has a simple playing focus and keeps her mind and body in a place of composure, confidence, and concentration. She performs to the best of her ability and is happy with her performance. Even when she loses a match, she's satisfied, even happy, that she did everything in her control — she knows her performance was great even though it didn't result in a win. She's excited about the next tournament because she's looking forward to continuing to perform well and getting better.



TECHNICAL
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THE AROUSAL LEVEL THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU

Table 10-1 outlines the various levels of arousal, which generally apply to athletes in every sport and at all levels of competition. When you understand the principles of arousal, you can begin to learn what it feels like to be in an optimal state of arousal (as opposed to being too aroused or not enough aroused).

The ideal or optimal arousal level is slightly different for every athlete. For example, one golfer may have a very low level of optimum arousal because it helps them to stay calm and relaxed when competing in a tournament. This level of arousal works for them. But another golfer's ideal arousal level may be a bit higher, because they are a higher-energy person, are a more aggressive player, or have a more extroverted or bold personality. Both levels can be "right" for each individual — it just depends on which state is associated with more successful performance for each individual golfer.

Take another example: soccer. A defensive player may like to be really pumped up before and during the games and play a very aggressive style of defense, frequently looking for the tackle and consistently making hard, professional fouls. A player in the midfield or on top in the striker position may play a more finesse-oriented game and may appear more calm and passive when on the field. Both levels of arousal are ideal for each person in this situation. The levels of arousal are different, but they're both ideal and optimal for these athletes individually.

The key is to pay attention to your own arousal levels and how they affect your performance, and strive for the level of arousal that's ideal for you.

Developing Your Ideal Mindset for Competition

You must begin to learn your ideal arousal level if you want to compete at your highest levels more consistently. Additionally, you must know this ideal mindset or zone of performance if you want to practice it beforehand. If you aren't aware of your ideal zone performance state, it is going to be hard to practice it.

It is like we say to our athletes — if we ask them to meet us at a coffee shop, but then we do not tell them exactly which coffee shop, you could be looking around all day, especially if you live in Seattle! But if you know the exact address of the coffee shop, you can go directly there.

The best way to start learning your ideal performance zone and level of arousal is by reflecting on and journaling about some of your best performances. This has always been an effective starting point for our athletes. You must be aware of something before you can improve on it. You can journal about some of your best performances, which will allow you to become familiar with your ideal levels of arousal. What were you thinking at the time, if anything at all? What emotions were you experiencing — excitement, calmness, relaxed, happy? How did your body feel — loose muscles, calm breathing? What were some of the things you were doing — talking a lot, cheering on teammates, quiet and reserved and slow moving, moving at a fast pace? And then, finally, what makes you select these performances as some of your best — did you perform well offensively? Defensively? Mentally?

As you begin to take notice of these past experiences and journal about them, you will become more much more aware. Once you are more aware, you can practice these mental and arousal states through additional journaling, imagery, meditation, or quiet reflection.

Handling Pressure Like a Pro

In an interview, the legendary college basketball coach John Wooden was asked to describe what qualities he looked for in his players. One of the qualities he cited was poise, which he defined as the ability to “be yourself” in stressful moments during competition. What does that mean? It means being the best, most natural version of yourself, free from pressures. We couldn't agree more with Wooden's definition of *poise*. It's exactly what you need in critical or stressful moments of competition.

In this section, we give you some simple techniques that you can use to enable yourself to be more at ease during stressful competition.

Preparing your mind and heart to manage pressure

Just like physical and fitness levels, you have to practice preparing your mind and heart to be at the ideal levels of arousal for you. First, awareness is key. Then you can begin to use some of the other tools in this book to become more familiar with your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Focusing on the task at hand

When you're about to compete, you can easily get caught up in the emotions of the moment. The problem is, if you let yourself get carried away by those emotions, your performance will suffer. Instead of focusing on your emotions, concentrate on the task at hand — the actual chore of your sport, such as hitting the forehand down the line in tennis or hitting the cutoff in softball. If you think about it, you realize that there's nothing emotional about these tasks themselves, and that's why you want to keep your focus on what you need to get done.

The more you can focus on doing your job, the better your chance of succeeding. Say you have to make the last-second field goal in a football game. Instead of focusing on how happy and excited you'll be if you make the kick (or how upset you'll be if you miss), try focusing on the simple act of kicking the field goal. Focus on your steps, your breathing, your pre-kick preparation and targeting, and your follow-through.

Being prepared in every way

The more prepared you are, the less likely you are to feel pressure. You can get prepared mentally, technically, and physically — and help keep pressure at bay.

Mind, body, and heart preparation

Have a mental game plan for every practice and competition. A *game plan* is simply a strategy for playing your best mentally. Write your plan in a notebook, and track your game plan over time. Understand your strengths as a competitor, and plan to use those strengths during the competition. (For more information on how to identify your strengths and put them to good use, check out Chapter 3.)

Practice using imagery (see Chapter 7, Tool #2) to reduce the feeling of pressure. Finally, work on improving your goal setting (see Chapter 3). Make sure you are preparing your arousal level using mind, body, and heart preparation techniques.

Technical preparation

A great way to reduce pressure is to ensure that your skills are sharp. The more confident you are in your skills, the less pressure you'll feel. Confident athletes simply perform better. By putting more time into your skill development, you'll increase your ability to perform that skill successfully when it matters most.

Physical preparation

Keep yourself in top physical shape, so that you don't need to worry about your body letting you down. The more you can trust your body to perform as needed in competition, the more confident you'll be during competition.

Being physically fit — with a combination of cardio and strength training — is important for all sports, but the balance of these two types of fitness depends on your sport. If you're involved in a sport that requires a lot of running (such as track, cross country, soccer, or basketball), you'll want to put more emphasis on cardio training. If you compete in a power sport (such as football, rugby, lacrosse, or weight lifting), then more lifting and strength training is necessary. Work with a physical trainer or a strength and conditioning coach who knows your sport so you can maximize your physical fitness for the task at hand.

Nontraditional physical training approaches — including yoga, Pilates, massage, and spinning — have been found to improve fitness as well, because they work to increase your flexibility and strengthen your core muscles (midsection) and stabilizer muscles (the little muscles that help out the bigger ones).

Don't forget about nutrition and sleep — they're key to maintaining good fitness. If your body isn't fueled correctly or properly rested, your concentration and ability to manage pressure drops, because you won't have the energy to meet the demands of competition. Even if you know the latest mental-training techniques, if you don't have the actual physical and mental stamina, these techniques won't matter much.



REMEMBER

When the body tires, the mind follows. Being confident is difficult when your body is tired or worn down, or when your physical energy is low. When you believe in and know that your body can endure all the physical pain and stamina that competition requires, you'll be more confident and less affected by pressure.



ANECDOTE

IT'S NOT ALL IN YOUR HEAD

Todd worked with a talented high school quarterback who wanted to increase his confidence and leadership on the field. At the time, he was a freshman and he wanted to play quarterback at the college level. He came to Todd because he thought working with a sports psychologist would help him build confidence. But during the initial consultation, he expressed self-doubts about his physical stature, arm strength, speed, and even a slight twinge of pain in his throwing shoulder.

Todd recognized right away that the athlete needed to believe in his physical body before he could do anything with mental training. Todd could've taught him mental skills to help improve confidence, but as long as the athlete didn't trust and believe in his body, he would still fold under the weight of pressure. Todd told the young quarterback that he would need to work with a strength and conditioning coach for a minimum of three months, as well as seek medical attention regarding his shoulder, before Todd could work with him. This increased physical training would increase the athlete's confidence and, as a result, his ability to manage pressure.

The athlete did what Todd suggested and came back after four months. The difference was amazing — he felt confident and strong, and he believed in his body. He told Todd how he also tended to his shoulder and found out it was only a minor injury. He described how much confidence he had gained in the past four months — all without any help from Todd! His attitude was exhilarating and he was excited about the next season — he knew he would make an impact because of his increased confidence. He had taken a huge step in managing pressure — believing in his body. He went on to have the best summer conditioning and preseason of his life and he's on track to play at the college level.



WARNING

Make sure to take care of injuries immediately. Small muscle pulls can lead to larger long-term injuries if not treated.

Getting perspective



REMEMBER

Sport supports life — not the other way around. If you can remember that, you'll be able to deal with setbacks, successes, and failures, and you'll improve your ability to relax and enjoy each moment. Even though, in the moment, sports can mean everything to you, it's only *part* of your life — and it's never life and death. As Irv Blitzer from the Jamaican bobsled team said, "A gold medal is a wonderful thing, but if you're not enough without it, you'll never be enough with it." (Check out the movie, *Cool Runnings*, about the Jamaican bobsled team.)



ANECDOTE

FAILURE IS UNAVOIDABLE

Sometimes gaining perspective and understanding that failure is part of the game will enable you to perform better. Ben, a lacrosse goalie at a major Division I school, was hobbled by a fear of failure. He obsessed over being scored on in practice and in games, worrying that the goals he let through would cause his team to lose. Ben's constant focus on failure meant that he was always under pressure — and as a result, his muscles were tight and he performed at a much lower level than he was capable of.

Ben needed perspective: The best lacrosse goalies fail 40 percent of the time. Perfection doesn't exist for a lacrosse goalie. After he gained perspective and realized that failure is unavoidable — not only in lacrosse but in life — he was able to let go of his fear. He became more relaxed between the pipes, more focused, and he eventually went on to become an all-American, improving his save percentage by almost 10 percent!

If you're experiencing too much pressure prior to competition, ask yourself, "What's the worst-case scenario, and can I deal with it?" Usually the worst-case scenario is a loss or a failure, and you've dealt with both many times before in your life, which means you can deal with them again.

Look at athletic success and failures as single moments in time. You might perform poorly, but it truly is only a single moment in time. The same is true with success. As long as you play your sport, there are always going to be these simple moments or points in time, win, lose, or tie.

Changing your self-talk

Most of the time, when you experience pressure, it'll be due, at least in part, to poor self-talk. You may notice yourself saying things like "I'd better not screw up" or "What if I fail?" or "What if I let down my team?" or "What if I don't get a college scholarship?" This type of self-talk creates pressure and anxiety.

The first step to changing your self-talk is to become aware of what you're saying to yourself. Most of the time, you aren't even aware of your self-talk because it happens so quickly. All you feel is the anxiety and pressure and have no idea how it got there.

Here are some examples of negative self-talk and the resulting emotions:

Negative Self-Talk	Result
"I have to win!"	Anxiety
"What if I screw up?"	Worry

Productive self-talk, on the other hand, results in positive emotions — emotions that help you to perform better, such as excitement or relaxation. Here are some examples of productive self-talk:

Productive Self-Talk	Result
"I'm going to give it my best."	Poise, relaxation
"I can do this."	Focus, composure

Make sure you understand how your self-talk creates your emotional state. When it's negative, it creates a negative emotional state. When it's productive, it creates a positive emotional state. When your self-talk is productive, you can stay in your ideal arousal zone, which is where your best performances occur.

For much more on self-talk and ways to improve yours, turn to Chapter 8.

Understanding what you can control

One of the causes of pressure is worrying about things over which you have no control. When you put your focus on uncontrollable factors, you experience pressure and, in turn, poor performance. Here are just some of the things over which you have no control:

- » What others will think about your performance
- » How much game time you'll get
- » Whether you'll win
- » How the fans or your parents will react
- » Whether you'll make the team
- » Whether you'll get a scholarship



REMEMBER

Winning and losing are out of your control, but your individual performance isn't.

When you focus on the things you can control, you'll be poised and relaxed. Here are some of the things you have control over:

- » How much you prepare
- » How much you practice
- » How much sleep you get
- » Your diet
- » How you warm up
- » Your attitude
- » Your mental preparation
- » Your mental health
- » Your resiliency and grit



TIP

Before competitions, make a list of the things you have control over and then focus only on these things. Many times it is helpful to do this before practice. You need to “consciously” train your automatic thoughts so that positive things happen more automatically in the manner you desire. Control the controllable, we always say!



REMEMBER

Just because you can't worry about winning doesn't mean that you can't set a goal of winning. You just have to remember that you'll have the greatest chance of winning when you focus on the things you can control instead.

Journaling

Another great way to manage pressure is to write in a journal about your thoughts and feelings. Whenever you feel pressure, acknowledge and address it. You need to figure out where the pressure came from, and in what situations you feel it most intensely. Sometimes, journaling is all it takes to reduce pressure during competition.

Many athletes feel that talking or writing about their fears and anxieties is a sign of weakness. Nothing could not be further from the truth. Don't believe us? Try bottling up your thoughts and feelings for a while, and see how well you perform. Sometimes Todd simply tells his athletes to “empty their head and heart” as a way to manage pressure.



TIP

When you're feeling pressure, write all your thoughts and feelings down on paper. A good time to do this is just before competition and immediately after competition. Writing things down helps you in two ways:

- » It gets the thoughts out of your head.
- » It helps you analyze pressure more objectively after the fact.

The night before you compete, write down anything and everything on your mind that has nothing to do with your upcoming competition. You may have negative thoughts and worries, or you may be thinking about other things outside of your sport. Write them down, and then take a minute to rip up that piece of paper and throw the scraps in the recycling bin. This is a nice way to empty your mind of distracting or unhelpful thoughts as you're preparing for competition.



TIP

If writing is hard for you, try calling a friend, family member, coach, teammate, sports psychologist, or someone you trust and talk to that person about your thoughts and feelings. This conversation can help you see the flaws in your thinking and help get you back to competing well.

Breathing and stretching

You can tell that you're succumbing to pressure by paying attention to your body and the signals it sends you. Earlier in this chapter, we list the signs of pressure. If you spot any of those signals, you can employ some simple breathing and stretching techniques to regain control and composure, which we cover in the following sections.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

HOOK ME UP!

Neurofeedback or biofeedback instruments use electrodes (placed on the head and chest) to monitor things like heart rate, respiration, and sweat levels on the surface of your skin. This area of sports psychology is becoming more common when it comes to performance measurement. These instruments help athletes see and hear their own bodies and how they're reacting at any given moment, as well as learn to control their bodies.

For example, an athlete might wear a heart rate monitor and see their heart rate on the computer. They can then learn to control their heart rate — breathe heavier to increase heart rate and breathe slower to slow their heart rate. If you're interested in how these tools can help you, consult a sports psychologist.

Breathing

If your breathing is shallow or too fast, simply stop and take a deep, slow, cleansing breath. Take deep breaths throughout competition, not just when you're feeling pressure. Deep, cleansing breaths prevent the buildup of pressure. They help you get into your ideal mental state.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

We teach breathing strategies to athletes to keep their hearts in a state of “coherence.” The more coherent their state of heart, the more positive signals being sent to the brain. The more “incoherent” the heart, the more negative signals being sent. We frequently encourage our athletes to practice with a simple biofeedback device that displays all of this information right on their smartphone. The athletes are simply training their hearts and minds. Why not train both if they both can help you? Using the biofeedback device just 5–10 minutes a few times a week can make a big difference in increasing your state of coherence.

Pay attention to successful pitchers before they throw — you'll see them take a deep breath. Watch basketball players before they take free throws — yep, they take a deep breath. Golfers take a deep breath as part of their pre-shot routine. Kickers slow down and breathe immediately before game-winning kicks in football. Coincidence? Not at all.



ANECDOTE

Brandon is a golfer on the Nationwide Tour who has made breathing a part of his pre-shot routine. When he's behind the ball picking out his target, he takes a deep breath to relax his body. He does this on every shot. When the pressure builds, such as when he has to make a birdie or is in a position to win, Brandon not only continues his deep breathing as part of his pre-shot routine, but he also breathes more deeply when he's walking between his shots.

Stretching

If your muscles are tighter than usual because of pressure, try stretching. When you stretch your muscles, you're automatically helping them relax by expending nervous physical energy. Your muscles need to be relaxed in order for you to perform your best. All athletes experience muscle tension and tightness, but you can reduce and/or eliminate it by stretching.

Golfers take practice swings to stretch their muscles and loosen tension. Baseball or softball hitters take practice swings and move around in the batter's box to eliminate jitters. Volleyball players stretch their arms and roll their shoulders before they serve.



TIP

You can also use the “tense-relax” technique where you tense specific muscle groups, such as their hands, for 5–10 seconds, and then relax and shake them out. This helps the muscles be in a more relaxed state, which will assist in better athletic performance.

Developing your personal plan for managing pressure

Now that you know many ways to manage pressure, it’s time to put a weekly and daily practice schedule together. The first step is to build your awareness about how your thinking affects your performance. Once you have developed your awareness, you can practice the strategies in this chapter. Here is an example of a weekly plan that you can use in your training:

- » **Day 1:** Journal about great performances or moments in practice or competition in the past week for 15 minutes. Spend 10 minutes deep breathing to help place your heart in a state of coherence. Journal 5 minutes before and 5 minutes after a practice or game.
- » **Day 2:** Use imagery to relax your body and see yourself performing exactly the way you want for 15 minutes.
- » **Day 3:** Listen to a favorite podcast or watch a favorite video on mastery or peak performance. We have many free ones available for you. Journal 5 minutes before and 5 minutes after a practice or game.
- » **Day 4:** Review a great performance log or journal; write any additional great moments; practice deep breathing for 10–15 minutes.
- » **Day 5:** Make sure you have emptied your head and heart — journal or talk to someone about anything on or off the field that might be distracting or weighing heavy on your heart and mind.
- » **Day 6:** Make sure to use the “tense-relax” technique during practice or games. Take time to practice imagery and imagine you are achieving your ideal state of arousal.

- » Dealing with loss
- » Seeing mistakes as opportunities
- » Surviving slumps
- » Forgiving your own mistakes
- » Preventing and bouncing back from injuries

Chapter **11**

Tool #6: Handling Adversity: The Art of Resilience

In sports, just as in life, you'll face obstacles and pitfalls that will test you, no matter how patient and optimistic you are. No athlete is exempt from adversity — what separates the best athletes from the rest is their ability to bounce back.

In this chapter, we explain what resilience is (sometimes referred to as *grit*) and how important it is to manage your mindset during times of adversity in sports and life. We also explain the difference between loss and failure — outlining a simple shift in mindset that can help you deal with loss. We give you proven strategies for pulling yourself out of a slump — and tell you what *not* to do when you're in a slump. Most people, athletes included, are their own worst critics, so we tell you how to forgive yourself for mistakes, instead of letting mistakes control you. Finally, we cover injuries — how to recover from them and how to prevent them from happening in the first place.

Resilience: Returning to a Better Mindset after a Struggle

Resilience is a crucial aspect to life and sport. We feel that the importance of resilience in athletes and sports competition is a critical factor of sustained success over time. In fact, in Leif's work with professional teams (such as the Columbus Blue Jackets of the National Hockey League), he emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining resilience, on par with physical skills such as speed and power.

What is resilience? It is a mindset, really, that determines how athletes will respond once adversity strikes. Bad referee calls, sickness, injury, bad bounces, or coaching changes can all disrupt your attention and focus, but only if you allow that to happen. Resilience implies managing your mindset so that these disruptive factors don't affect your performance to any great degree. It is important that you take a proactive mindset — one in which you actively decide how you want to respond to the events around you — if you want to become more resilient as an athlete.

Accepting adversity and mistakes as opportunities

One of the things that Leif likes to tell his athletes is that adversity is a guaranteed aspect of life and sports participation. Bad things happen, no matter how hard to we try to avoid them. The problem, then, isn't that bad things happen or that adversity strikes. The problem is really how you view these events mentally. If you think about adverse events as unfair things that shouldn't happen to you, you are taking a different mindset than if you think about adverse events as opportunities to practice your mental and emotional toughness. One simple change in mindset can make an enormous difference in how you feel and behave when things get tough in life and sports!

One example we use to demonstrate this principle is exam performance. We both teach at the college level and occasionally witness students getting a lower grade than they expected. Let's say that two different students get a C on an exam. One student is devastated and holes up in their room for days and stresses and does not sleep well for a week because of the worry around the C. The other student — with the same exact grade — is upset, but recognizes they need to study harder, meet with the professor, get tutoring, or some handful of these things. They are upset, but they do not let the grade get them down for days and weeks. It's the same situation, but a very different mindset.

Knowing that perfection is a myth

We see so many athletes in our offices that come to us with perfectionistic mindsets. These athletes tend to fit a particular psychological profile and have the following characteristics:

- » Analytical thinkers
- » Good students
- » Highly competitive
- » Come from high-achieving families (parents and siblings)
- » Are often more fear-based
- » Often have an anxious personality style

Athletes that have these characteristics tend to fall into the category of perfectionistic. They just can't handle the idea that they won't be perfect in their sport. Though this is a noble and well-intentioned pursuit, it can be extremely detrimental to overall performance. Why? Well, what is the use in striving for something that hasn't and never will exist? Think about it: How often has anything in your life been "perfect?" Even your best performances in sport contained errors of some sort. Striving for perfection in sports (and life) is a losing game from the start. The only thing you can feel when pursuing perfection is frustration and disappointment. That doesn't seem like a rewarding pursuit, does it?

Remember to strive for excellence. Strive to be better in a process over which you have control. Resiliently trying to get 1 percent better every day is a great pursuit. We are all perfectly imperfect athletes and people!

Developing your ideal mindset builds resilience

One of the most rewarding aspects of our work with athletes involves watching them develop more resilience and toughness. You can build resilience, just like you develop your muscles and speed! If you want to be a better performer, it is important for you to start developing a plan to improve your own resilience. To do this, you need to focus on developing your ideal mindset, which should include the following characteristics:

- » Mental flexibility (not getting "stuck" when you make a mistake)
- » Optimism (looking on the bright side of events as often as possible)

- » Ability to let go of mistakes quickly (or positive forgetfulness!)
- » Routines for calming yourself (before, during, and after competition)
- » Practice adversity (pushing yourself to be uncomfortable in practice so you can develop increased toughness and awareness for games and competition — you need to be uncomfortable in order to get comfortable)

It is very important to intentionally develop your resilience, since this is an oft-overlooked aspect of sports success. Work as diligently on your resilience plan and on developing a better mindset as you do in the weight room.

Looking at Loss Differently

Sports are unique. Why? Because, in sports, the bottom line is that one team or individual wins, and one team or individual loses — and just about nothing else in life is this clear-cut. Think about it: How many things in life come down to winning and losing? How can you win or lose with friendships? With love? With your career? With school? Life just isn't that simple.

When you recognize that winning and losing are inherent in sports, you can deal with wins and losses differently. You won't be so devastated when you lose, and you won't get a big head when you win. It is important to remember that although winning feels great, you will always learn more about yourself in a loss. Keep that in mind. A loss or performance can sting, but what you do with it — learn from it or beat yourself up — is up to you.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

On the PGA Tour, there is a something called the “bounce back” statistic. It looks at how a player responds to a bogey or greater on a hole and measures the percentage of time they can respond with a birdie on the next hole. If you look at any given year, you can see that a high percentage is between 20–30 percent, meaning that 20–30 percent of the time a PGA player had a bogey or more, they fought for got a birdie or lower on the next hole. Incredible actually! If you look at the Top 10 golfers meeting this statistic, they are frequently multi-millionaires. It's worth developing that resiliency muscle!

Recognizing that loss isn't necessarily failure

The key to dealing with loss is to differentiate it from failure. Losing and failing are two separate things. Losing means that your opponent had the better score or time at the end of the competition. You can fail in your game execution or fail in

your match goals but still win the competition. Failure is about whether you reached your goals; losing is only about whether your opponent bettered your score or time.



REMEMBER

Losing does not equal failure. You might lose a game or competition, but you didn't fail because it still could have been one of your personal best performances. In the same way, you may win but still fail because you didn't do your best.



ANECDOTE

Todd worked with a very passionate college golfer who's a great example of someone who lost in competition, but certainly didn't fail. Kate had played consistently all season but hadn't won a tournament. Although, in some ways, she was disappointed, she was also happy with her consistency. Toward the end of the season, at the conference championship, Kate was focused and motivated to win. She was in an excellent place after the first two rounds and knew she could take the lead and win on the last day: She was in third place, with the leader two shots ahead of her and the second-place player only one shot ahead of her. There were three others tied one stroke behind her. Kate began the day very well, starting with two birdies in the first five holes. She had a small slip midway through, but she was still in good shape. In the end, she shot a career low of 68. Still, Kate didn't win the tournament. Sure, she was disappointed at the loss, but she hadn't failed. She played her best golf ever and she competed well under a lot of pressure.



REMEMBER

The next time you lose a competition, remind yourself that losing isn't necessarily failing. Focus on your performance, not on the final score.

Knowing the difference between getting beat and losing

There is a big difference between getting beat and losing. Getting beat means that your opponent outplayed you — they executed better, worked harder, stayed in the moment better, and focused and concentrated better during crucial moments. They utilized their skills better than you did. Getting beat simply means that, on that day, your opponent deserved the win more than you did. They earned it.

Losing, on the other hand, can happen in multiple ways. You can be more talented than your opponent, but if you're lazy, or if your strategy isn't up to par, or if you simply make too many errors or mistakes, you'll lose to your opponent. Losing is a reactive, passive way to describe the outcome of a competition. Your opponent didn't necessarily *earn* the win as much as you *lost*.



TIP

As an athlete, if you have to make a choice between losing and getting beat, choose to get beat every time. You want to force your opponents to play their best. If you remain on top of your game and use the principles in this book, you can bring out the best of your athletic abilities. At that point, your opponents will need to exert

a tremendous effort to beat you — but if and when it does happen (and it does, even to the best athletes), you won't have any regrets. You'll know you gave it your all.



REMEMBER

When you get beat, you don't have regrets. When you lose, you'll have numerous regrets because you didn't do everything in your power to succeed.

Pulling Yourself Out of Slumps

Everyone who has ever participated in competitive sports for a while has experienced being in a slump. A *slump* is simply an extended period of time during which you perform worse than you normally do. Slumps are characterized by increased frustration, overexertion, and a dramatic and noticeable loss of confidence. They can last for short or long periods of time, depending on both the sport and the athlete. The key to getting out of slumps is to understand their causes. Then you can learn how to work through slumps, and minimize the damage they do to both your long-term performance and your confidence.



REMEMBER

Poor performance doesn't necessarily equate to a slump. You'll make mistakes and have less-than-ideal performances at times, but that doesn't mean you're in a slump. You need to acknowledge performance decrements and mistakes, but it can help to think of those mistakes as a series of separate incidents as opposed to a slump, which tends to have a more long-term and negative connotation.

Understanding why slumps happen

Slumps are the result of a perfect storm — a variety of events happening all at once. The first ingredient is a statistical downturn — your shooting percentage decreases, your times are slower, and so on. But a performance decrease alone does not a slump make. Slumps happen when that performance decrease is combined with the mental aspect of trying too hard, putting constant pressure on yourself to succeed, exerting extreme effort without any results, or overtraining mentally and physically. So, failure begets more failure, particularly when you don't attend to the mental aspects of staying strong and optimistic. And the downward spiral begins.



REMEMBER

Slumps are a normal occurrence in sports. Everybody goes through them. You *will* experience slumps — your goal is to manage their length and the damage they can do to your confidence. However, a drop in performance is also an incredible opportunity to practice resilience. Remember, your mental and emotional skills need practice just like your skill and fitness.

Focusing on fundamentals

In order to beat a slump, you need to get back to the basics of your sport. That means focusing your efforts on improving your basic skill set. For example, if you're a baseball or softball player, that means spending time working on the basics of your swing. If you're a basketball player, it means breaking down your jump shot form. For golf, it means mastering simple, individual components of your swing and game and then letting it all come together.

Getting back to the fundamentals, which you have in your muscle memory because you have done it for so long, helps you simply enjoy the movement without overthinking and overanalyzing. This helps get you back to your body, heart, and enjoyment and not get lost in your head.



REMEMBER

The goal here is to get back to the basics. Focus on and execute just the fundamentals of your sport skills. Often, focusing on the simplicity of the technical aspects of your sport will allow you to recover from a slump or poor performance more quickly.

Being mindful

For a detailed discussion of mindfulness, be sure to check out Chapter 12. Besides the technical aspect of getting back to basics (see the preceding section), you must get back to the mental fundamentals. One way to do this is to practice mindfulness. *Mindfulness* is a Buddhist practice that means the art of living in the moment. Mindfulness is about being fully engrossed in the moment, without judging the moment positively or negatively. It's the ability to be in the now. Many times you hear great athletes talk about their great performances and mention the word "present" or "in the moment." You too have had these moments! But you still need to practice being present and mindful. It is a hard skill that takes discipline. And you will never be perfect at it. You can just get better and more consistent.

To better understand the art of being mindful, compare it with the everyday mindset that you usually experience:

Everyday Thinking	Mindful Thinking
Analytical	Descriptive
Judgmental	Curious/accepting
Past and future oriented	Present oriented
Juggles multiple thoughts	Manages one thought only at a time
Distracted	Focused

There is a distinct difference between everyday thinking and mindful thinking. One is distracted, focusing on multiple issues past and present, and the other is simply focusing on what's happening and present oriented.

In sports, being mindful is extremely helpful, because it allows you to focus on the moment. In that moment, you focus on only your task as a competitor, whether it's hitting a tennis ball, catching a football, sinking a putt, or pacing yourself on a run.



TIP

Here are some additional mental fundamentals that you can use to pull yourself out of a slump:

- » **Relax your muscles.** When you're in a slump or you're struggling with performance, your muscles will likely tighten up, inhibiting performance by making your movements more jerky and rigid. Relax your muscles through stretching, practicing progressive muscle relaxation (see Chapter 12), or even taking a simple jog.
- » **Breathe.** One of the physical reactions your body has when you're nervous is shallow breathing. Take deep, controlled breaths as a way to slow your heart rate, calm your thought process, and relax your muscles.
- » **Pursue simple tasks.** Often, when you're in a slump, many thoughts are running through your mind, including doubts about your skills, memories of previous poor performances, and thoughts about what you're doing wrong. Break down your tasks to the basics. For example, if you're a golfer struggling with putting, simply focus on the idea of a smooth stroke and nothing more.
- » **Focus on the process.** Keep your mind on the tasks before you to get better. Focus on *how* you do things rather than the outcome of what you're doing. The outcomes will eventually turn around if you focus on the process of getting better.
- » **Set small daily achievable goals.** Write down and track your practice goals daily. By accomplishing small goals each day, your confidence will build and your belief in yourself will rise prior to your next competition.
- » **Execute skills without thinking.** Often, you can practice some of the basic skills without any thinking. For example, golfers can just relax and swing the club without worrying about where it's going to go. Tennis players can serve the ball as hard as they usually do just to relax muscles and let go. Baseball players can swing the bat multiple times as hard as they can to just relax. Soccer players can make crosses without thinking. Go on autopilot on purpose.

» **Surround yourself with support team.** When you go through a tough time in sports or life, it is important to have good emotional support around you. In fact, close emotional support through family and friends will not only get you out of a tough time sooner, but it has also shown to heal injury faster. With a good support system, people even live longer and healthier lives.



REMEMBER

Athletes in slumps tend to overthink everything related to their performance. Not only will overthinking do nothing to help your performance, but it'll only serve to extend the length of your slump. You may think that you have to work harder or practice longer or perform drills until your hands bleed in order to get out of a slump, but that isn't the answer. You want to keep things quiet and simple to return to your normal level of play.



ANECDOTE

A TWO-WEEK TURNAROUND

Todd was working with a professional tennis player who, for several months, had been having problems with her game. Shannon wasn't playing how she knew she could play, and she was feeling extremely frustrated. She even thought about giving up the game because she wasn't winning or even qualifying for main draws in the tournaments she entered. One of the specific areas hurting Shannon was her second serve. She lost nearly all confidence in her second serve and consistently double-faulted.

Todd had Shannon hit 50 second serves as fast as she could, without caring whether they were in or not. She began to loosen up and allow her natural skill and form to come back. After these 50 balls, Todd had Shannon focus on a basic serve thought — "ball toss" — and had her begin to try for more accuracy. She immediately started getting more serves in because she was focused on her ball toss (the process) and not on the outcome (whether ball was in or not). When the process became more smooth and automatic, Shannon's confidence grew. Todd then had her pick a very specific focal point (a cone) in the service box. She was to try to hit this cone as many times as possible. She was amazed at how many times she came close to hitting it. Shannon practiced this way for almost two weeks and then had the chance to try it out in tournament play, where she reduced her number of double faults by 80 percent!

Sometimes all it takes to pull yourself out of a slump is to focus on the basic skills of your sport and give your mind something specific to think about.

Bouncing Back after Mistakes in Competition

Newsflash: No matter how good you get at your sport, you're going to make mistakes. You'll drop the big pass, miss a blocking assignment, miss the forehand down the line wide on a big point, or strike out with the bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth. Making mistakes is a natural part of sports. Even the best athletes in the world regularly make mistakes. But top athletes also bounce back, usually in a big way. You will see dropped passes and overthrows in college football every single weekend in just about every single game!



REMEMBER

Everyone, from the top athletes in the world down to weekend warriors, makes mistakes. Nobody is immune from screwing up.

Knowing what happens mentally after a mistake

Most athletes, after they make a mistake, blame themselves, put themselves down, and generally make things worse. They blame their team's loss on their own mistakes, and minimize the consequences of their positive actions. This reaction is normal but counterproductive.

In the moments immediately after you make a mistake, you have two choices for interpreting what just happened. You can

- » See it as an excuse to attack yourself and your abilities as an athlete
- » See it as a neutral or even positive event
- » Accept it, move forward, and know you can address it later

If you choose the first one, you enter into a spiral of negativity. If you choose the latter two, you can see your mistake for what it was: a mistake. You can even see it as evidence that you're at least in the game, trying to make something happen.

Which do you prefer: attacking yourself and your abilities every time something goes wrong, or making the best of the situations you find yourself in, knowing that mistakes are part of sports? If you want to be a high-level athlete, you need to learn how to make the best of bad situations, and quickly. Doing so will enable you to deal with the many adverse situations that you find yourself in as an athlete. Be curious, not judgmental.



REMEMBER

The more emotion you give to an experience or event, the longer it'll stay in your mind. You can probably recall the exact day, time, and place when you last made a major mistake in competition. Why? Because that mistake has strong emotional connections. You need to learn to attach strong emotions to your *positive* moments during competition and spend less mental energy on the negative ones.

If you don't bounce back from mistakes quickly, you automatically increase your risk of making more mistakes. Check out Figure 11-1 for an illustration of the two main paths after you make a mistake. Which path looks better to you?

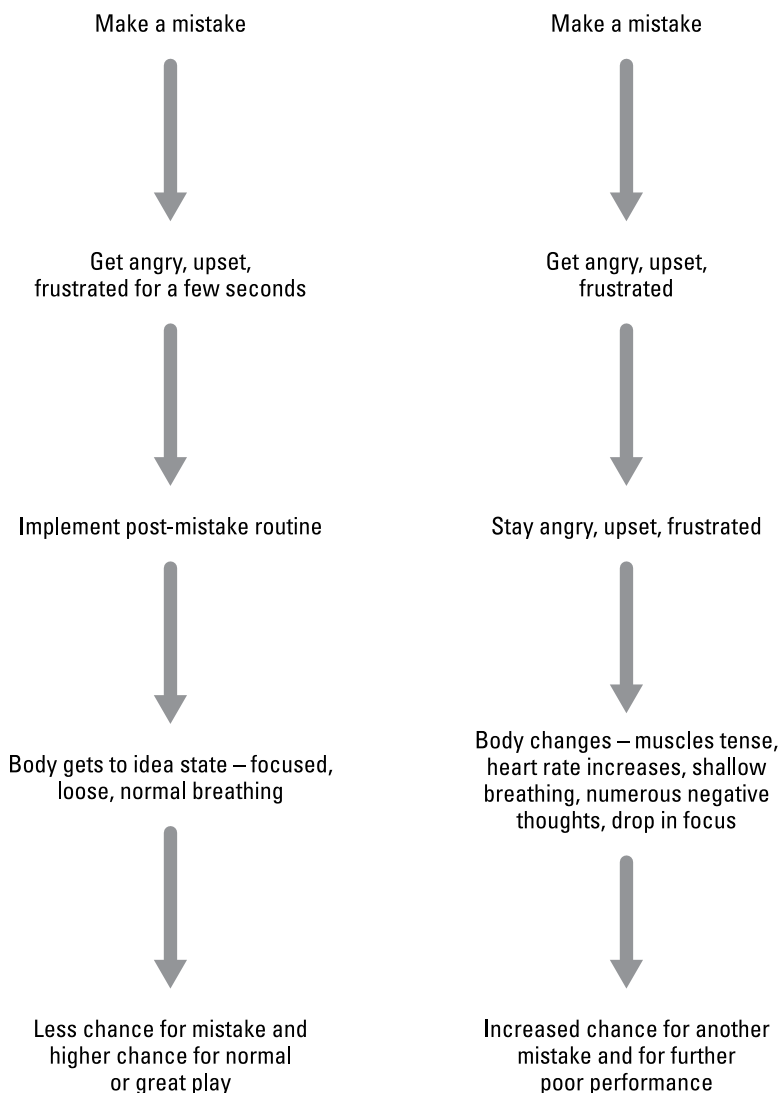


FIGURE 11-1:
You can choose how to respond after a mistake.

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Read on for information on establishing the post-mistake routines that allow you to choose the more effective path.

Establishing a post-mistake routine

Whether you realize it or not, you already have what we call a *post-mistake routine*, which is simply the behaviors you engage in immediately after you make a mistake. You've probably seen examples of less-than-helpful post-mistake routines, where athletes explode in anger, lose their concentration, or blame the referees or their opponents. You've probably also seen more positive post-mistake routines, where athletes laugh it off or take a moment to gather themselves before jumping back into competition.



TIP

The way you respond to a mistake needs to be automatic. And in order to make your automatic response a positive one, you need to determine how you'll respond before the competition starts, and work on that response in practice.

Here are some examples of helpful post-mistake routines:

- » **Use humor.** You can't change what just happened, so why not laugh at how silly it must seem? If you can't find anything funny about it, even faking a smile can work to help change your mood for the better. Plus, smiling confuses your opponent.
- » **Find a place to go where you can gather yourself.** In tennis, this might mean heading to the fence behind the baseline. In other sports, it might be simply turning your back and closing your eyes for a couple of seconds to regroup.
- » **Practice focused breathing.** Take three deep, slow breaths to clear your head.
- » **Come up with a physical way of letting go of mistakes.** For example, golfers sometimes pick up grass and let it fly away, allowing them to clear their heads and execute the correct swing.
- » **Try one of these processes to let go of your errors.**
 - **10 seconds or 10 steps:** If you can, take 10 seconds or 10 steps and whichever comes first, then train your mind to let go and focus on the present moment.
 - **Use a physical object as a symbol:** Tennis players might use a towel to "wipe away" the mistake as they wipe their face from sweat; golfers may pick up some grass in the fairway and toss it into the wind as a way to let their mistake go or they may "tap down" the divot as a way to leave the mistake. Some athletes find a small pebble or something on the ground and toss it to the side. Find some physical object or action to release and metaphorically let go of the mistake.



TIP

Make sure you have a simple and relevant thought that brings you back to what you need to be focusing on. If you're focusing on this thought, you can't be thinking about your mistake. For example, you may say to yourself "Next point," "Next shot," or "Let's go."

Table 11-1 is an exercise that forces you to think about what champions do after mistakes. It makes you look at your ability to respond to mistakes. Your job in filling out this table is to think about how champions respond to mistakes, how "mentally soft" athletes respond to mistakes, and how *you'll* respond to mistakes.

Once you've established a post-mistake routine, you'll have an easy and effective method for getting your focus and concentration back in competition. And when you have your focus and concentration back, you'll put yourself in a position to perform better and avoid making future mistakes. One of the hallmarks of high-achieving athletes is that they seldom make the same mistake twice, because they learn from every mistake they make. Their post-mistake routines enable them to learn these lessons on the go during competition.



REMEMBER

Whatever routine you choose, keep in mind the following points:

- » **You need to use the routine *immediately* after making the mistake.** The longer you wait to begin your routine, the lower your chance of being able to get yourself through the difficult situation.
- » **Your routine needs to be easy to use and portable.** You should be able to use it anywhere, anytime.
- » **What works for other athletes may not work for you.** Just because your teammate can use humor to laugh off their mistakes doesn't mean you'll be able to — and that's okay. The key is to find the routine that works for *you*.
- » **The more you use your routine, the better you'll be at it, and the more automatic the routine will become.** You won't have to think about using it — it'll just happen. This is an example of mental practice and of consciously retraining your subconscious.



REMEMBER

Preparation is the key. You *will* make mistakes — what you do after your mistakes and how you manage them is what matters.

TABLE 11-1 **How Athletes Respond to Mistakes**

Mistake	How Champion Athletes Respond	How “Mentally Soft” Athletes Respond	How I Respond
Striking out	Hustle back to the dugout, hustle back to the field, commit to be better the next time at bat	Scream at umpire, throw bat, complain and feel sorry for himself	

Dealing with Injuries

Injuries are the ultimate and worst type of adversity that every serious athlete faces. Unfortunately, they happen too often, and they tend to happen at exactly the wrong times in your competitive career.

In this section, we start by telling you how you can prevent injuries from happening. Then, because you can't always prevent injuries from occurring, we show you some ways to cope with them so that you can get back into competition as soon as possible.

Preventing injuries

Injuries are the enemy of all athletes — the last thing you want is to be sidelined by an injury. But the good news is, you can work to prevent injuries, or at least reduce the odds that they'll occur.

Managing stress

One the biggest factors in most health-related issues — and not just for athletes — is stress. As an athlete, you're under even more pressure than most people. Pressure from coaches, teammates, and yourself can compromise your immune system, which can make you more vulnerable to common colds and viruses. This can, in turn, reduce your effectiveness and even put you on the bench.

Plus, stress places tension in your muscles and decreases your focus. As an athlete, you're at greater risk for a physical injury when you're competing with tight muscles or limited focus.

When you're stressed, you also tend to focus on the wrong things. You may be worrying about outcomes (like getting taken out of game), making mistakes, or something completely unrelated to your sport. When this occurs, your mind isn't focused on what you're doing, and you place yourself at greater risk for physical injury.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Research indicates that there is a positive relationship between stress and injury. Thirty of 35 studies on the topic have demonstrated this relationship. Being under stress and/or not successfully managing stress places you at much greater risk for injury.

As an athlete, you already understand how hard it is to earn playing time. You don't want to give it up to someone else because you're sick or you've suffered a stress-related injury.



TIP

Here are some things you can do to better manage your stress and stay on the field:

- » **Stay on top of your schedule.** Don't let tasks and to-do lists pile up. An example is how many student-athletes can get behind or feel overwhelmed by their academic success, course load or assignments, and exams.
- » **Hang out with people who are happy and well adjusted, and who make you laugh.** Avoid toxic, negative-minded people. Research clearly shows that athletes without social support and with poor coping skills are at much higher risk for sustaining injury.
- » **Laugh!** Laughing is one of the healthiest things you can do to boost your immune system.
- » **Eat sensibly, especially around special events and holiday events.** You'll avoid the guilt that usually accompanies overeating, and you'll ensure that you aren't dumping excessive sugars and fats into your body.
- » **Get an hour more of sleep every night.** If you go to bed an hour earlier than usual and maintain this habit for one full year, you'll have added 45 more full nights of sleep (at 8 hours each) to your annual schedule! Your body can benefit from more sleep.
- » **Improve your self-talk.** This is such an important concept that we devote an entire chapter to it (see Chapter 8). Events and situations are not, in and of themselves, stressful — it's how you perceive those events that makes them stressful or not. Work on changing your thoughts so that you see every event as a learning opportunity rather than doomsday.
- » **Develop a strong support system.** Everyone needs emotional and mental support, especially when life is hard. Make sure you have people in your corner you can talk to and who love you unconditionally and accept you completely regardless of your successes or failures in sport. A sports psychologist can be key because of their training and knowledge of the athletic world and the challenges faced by athletes.
- » **Maintain perspective.** Sports are important and they help athletes achieve and develop. But remember that every athletic event or practice is a single moment in time and you will have many of these single moments of time as long as you play the sport. Do not let a single moment of time dictate your overall mood.

Mental skills training can improve your performance and help you manage stress. Many athletes learn these skills through work with sports psychologists and coaches, and by reading (which you're doing right now!) and educating themselves in their free time. They learn to manage pressure, optimize focus, set effective goals, use imagery to manage emotions, and manage energy levels for major competitions. These skills can also be used to help you manage stressful and challenging times in your life off the playing field.

Recognizing fatigue

The more fatigued your body is, the greater the chance that you'll get injured. So, it's important that you recognize fatigue as soon as it begins to set in. Too often, people ignore the telltale signs of fatigue, only to be faced with an illness or injury shortly thereafter.



TIP

Everybody gets tired, but chronic fatigue takes tiredness to another level. Tiredness is a short-term physical state, whereas fatigue is a prolonged physical state that puts you at increased risk for disease and injury. Here are some differences between being tired and suffering chronic fatigue.

Tiredness	Chronic Fatigue
Increased need for sleep	Constant feeling of being sleep deprived
Difficulty focusing at times	Inability to focus for long periods of time
Sore muscles	Pinched nerves and strained muscles, particularly in the neck and back
Normal appetite	Decreased appetite for most foods or increased appetite for unhealthy foods, such as those high in simple sugars
Normal motivation levels	Decreased motivation levels

When you're tired, or certainly when you're suffering from chronic fatigue, both your mind and your body are low on energy. You tend to lose your focus or try to do things your body can't do because of this tiredness. Injuries are common in these situations. So, make sure that you recognize this tired or fatigued state and handle it by getting sleep, being conscious of maintaining higher levels of focus, or simply not trying anything risky when your body is so tired. These symptoms can be similar to the ones you may experience if struggling in your sport or going through a slump. The methods and principles used to manage a slump can help reduce and eliminate chronic fatigue.



TIP

Make sure to recognize periods of time during the season or year when fatigue has a greater chance of occurring. For example, if you're a student, finals week is a time when fatigue occurs, putting you at greater risk for injury. Anticipate times when you'll be fatigued, and then plan to manage your time accordingly. Make sure to stick to a routine of healthy eating and sleeping, as well as taking more time to warm up before and after training. Take special care of your body during these stressful periods.

Maintaining sharp focus

When you're not focused, injuries can occur. Make sure that your focus is sharp and ready every time you enter practice or competition. We've seen athletes who've been working out in the weight room and injured themselves because they were distracted or weren't paying attention. We've also seen athletes who've been preoccupied with other thoughts and have gotten injured in competition because they weren't focused.



TIP

Before every practice and competition, make sure you're focused. Being focused will not only improve your overall athletic performance, but it'll also reduce the chances that you'll be injured. This is one of the many reasons why "mental warm-ups" are just as critical as skill and physical body warm-ups. For more on focus, turn to Chapter 6.

Coping with injuries

Injuries affect you physically and psychologically, and it's important that, when you're injured, you recuperate both ways. We show you how in the following sections.

The physical aspect of injuries

When you've been injured, several different medical personnel will probably be involved in your treatment. Your athletic trainer (if you're part of a team) will be a central part of your rehabilitation. Your team doctor and/or personal doctor will also help coordinate your care. You'll probably also work with a physical therapist, who will take you through rehab exercises.



TIP

Be in charge of your own medical care. Don't leave everything up to the staff around you. Only you know how your body responds, and only you can tell your healthcare team what's working and what isn't. As you take charge of your own recovery process, we encourage you to learn about all of the best and latest treatments, including alternative ones. Ask others who have been through the same injury and work with experts who have dealt with your injury or specialize in treating it.



REMEMBER

Your medical team is working with dozens or hundreds of different athletes at any one time, so you need to take responsibility for your own health and make sure you get what you need to heal.

Pain is an expected but unfortunate aspect of injury rehabilitation. You need to manage your pain and your expectations from the outset. Too often, athletes set themselves up for failure by setting unrealistic expectations for their rehabilitation. Then, when their bodies don't progress as quickly as they expected, they get even more frustrated, sad, or angry, which can set them back in the healing process.



TIP

Balance your hopes for a speedy recovery with realistic but achievable goals. You can do this by listening to your medical staff, offering your input on how your body is reacting to treatment, and doing everything you can to make sure you're allowing your body the time and resources it needs to heal properly. Treat your rehabilitation process just like you would a "performance." You get ready for your sport performance — recovering from an injury is another type of performance.

The psychological aspect of injuries

The way you cope with your injury psychologically will go a long way toward how well (and how quickly) your body will recover. In this section, we give you some powerful ways to mentally work through and adjust to any injury.

FOCUS ON DAILY GOALS

When you're injured, it can be difficult to stay inspired throughout the long and often isolating rehabilitation process. One way to increase your motivation is to break down your overall rehabilitation goals into daily goals. These daily goals will help to keep you motivated and focused, and will help to fight off any feelings of hopelessness that creep into your mind.

Focus your competitive nature on your rehabilitation just as fiercely as you typically do on the court or field. This allows you to get your juices flowing in a fun and hopeful way, while allowing you to feel better about your rehabilitation process.



TIP

Your goals should be *your* goals. Even if your doctor or trainer sets some simple daily rehabilitation goals for you, you should still set your own. Be safe, but do all of the little things correctly, such as ice. Do not cheat on your physical therapy exercises either.

BUILD YOUR SUPPORT TEAM

Ask any athlete who has ever been injured, and they will tell you that their support network played an enormous part in their return from that injury. Some athletes are naturally blessed with a built-in support network in the form of family and friends who cheer them on, but many athletes don't enjoy that luxury. If you don't have a built-in support network, you need to put a little more time and effort into building your rehabilitation support team.

Who you choose to be on your support team is entirely personal, but you may want to start with a family member you're close to, as well as some friends who understand how important your sport is to you. You can expand your support team to include your professional contacts (medical doctor, chiropractor, psychologist, athletic trainer, and/or physical therapist).



TIP

Choose your team wisely — they'll be your safety net when the process gets you down and feels never-ending. Here are some characteristics of people want on your team:

- » **Sense of humor:** You want to surround yourself with people who can make you laugh.
- » **Personal history and trust:** The more people you can have on your team who've known you for a long time and whom you trust, the better.
- » **Empathy for the role that your sport plays in your life:** If they don't get how much your sport means to you, they're off the team.
- » **History of athletic participation themselves:** Former athletes tend to understand and empathize with current athletes, regardless of which sport they played.
- » **The ability to give you a pep talk:** From time to time, you'll need a kick in the pants, and you want people on your team who aren't afraid to deliver one.
- » **Accountability and responsibility:** You need people who can help keep you focused on your goals and on returning from your injury as quickly as possible. They can't flake out on you after a few weeks — they need to be in it for the long haul.

MAINTAIN PERSPECTIVE

Perspective is a wonderful tonic to soothe you during your most difficult moments as an athlete. When you get injured, you tend to lose perspective about the big picture in life. You may become sad, confused, and angry at your circumstances. This is especially true when you've been injured more than once in your career, or when the same injury recurs.

One gift you get from injury is time. It is up to you to make good use of the time. It's not easy, but you can use the time to learn more about your sport from a different perspective, catch up on academic work, finish your degree if you are a professional athlete, pursue a hobby, spend time with loved ones, or enjoy the down time and simply relax. This is also a great time to practice the mental side of your sport!

Perspective allows you to move past the injury and to see the positive consequences that usually follow. These positive consequences include an eventual renewed passion for your sport, increased muscle strength, and improved relationships with your support team and network.



TIP

Here are some ways to maintain your perspective following an injury:

- » **Engage in activities that have nothing to do with your sport.** Doing something else will allow you to relax a bit.
- » **Stay involved in team activities as much as you're comfortable doing.** This will allow you to feel like you're still an important part of the team.
- » **Take up a hobby.** You'll have more downtime than you're used to, so you may as well help fill that time with an activity that provides you relaxation and pleasure.
- » **Reach out to old friends.** When you connect with others, this helps you to not focus on your injury all the time. Friends can keep you distracted, help you maintain perspective, and ask you to do things socially — all good things when working through the injury process.
- » **Hone your mental skills.** This is also a great time to practice your mental skills. Just as all the mental skills — focus, mental imagery, goal setting, and so on — can help your athletic performance, they're critical to helping your through the injury rehabilitation process. Research shows that athletes who use mental skills during recovery handle the process much better and return to their sport sooner.



ANECDOTE

Todd worked with a professional soccer player who was out for about two months due to a severe concussion. During this time, he had this player engage in all kinds of mental training skills — imagery, goal-setting, motivational techniques, and mindfulness — as well as attending practices, watching game film, and staying closely connected to teammates and coaches to talk about the game. When he was finally cleared and got back on the field, his coaches and teammates were shocked, because he played as if he had not missed a day. He was not surprised nor was Todd because they both knew how effective his recovery time was.

USE IMAGERY

Imagery, or focused daydreaming, is a great way to speed up the healing process. You can use healing imagery during the rehabilitation process to aid your recovery. Imagery can also calm the body, increase serotonin levels, and block the “pain gate” to the brain.



TIP

Here’s how to use imagery to help yourself heal:

- » **Use creative imagery to enhance your healing.** You can imagine that your injury is a foreign invader in your body, and that your white blood cells are the special-forces soldiers assigned to eliminate the invader. Picture these “soldiers” arming themselves and going on missions to attack the invader.
- » **Use colors to help speed the healing process.** In particular, you may imagine injuries in red and healing in blue. When you visualize, try to imagine making the red injury smaller and more pink in color. Eventually, you can imagine it turning from pink to white, and then to a light blue, and then dark blue, which is cool and soothing, relaxed and healed.
- » **Watch videos.** Watching video or film is a form of imagery. The more game film you watch, the closer to the game you stay. Imagery helps speed the healing process and helps you maintain your skills.



REMEMBER

You’ll be better at using imagery in rehabilitation if you’ve been using it all along as part of your training. All the more reason to get started using imagery right away. For the complete lowdown on imagery, see Chapter 7.

Dealing with the Fear of Reinjury

One of the most common concerns that athletes have after a serious injury is fear of becoming reinjured. The anxiety around reinjury can be so great that some athletes delay their return to sport, and in some cases, choose not to return. The fear around reinjury can be so mentally and emotionally painful that athletes experience anxiety and even depression. It can be very difficult to let go of this fear.

It is natural to have some level of fear when returning to your sport after a serious injury. One differentiation to consider is between “return to play” and “return to perform.”

- » Many athletes are cleared to “return to play” by the medical staff and that simply means they can compete again. There may be some qualifications in the beginning (such as limited contact), but they can practice and play again.

- » A “return to perform” is when an athlete is mentally ready to return to previous levels of performance. This is a whole different aspect than simply returning to play. This is the mental side — the performance mindset — where fear and anxiety can seem intense.

Some tips to consider if you’re dealing with this fear:

- » **See a sports psychologist.** Sports psychologists are experts in helping athletes manage the emotions around returning to performance after injury. One of the most important points to realize is that it is normal to have these feelings. A sports psychologist can set you on a path so you can return to perform. They can help you sort out the emotional pieces in the mix.
- » **Work closely with a physical therapist.** When you are rehabbing from an injury, a good physical therapist is crucial. They can help you gradually improve and perform basic movements so that you feel confident and can trust your body again. The more trust you feel in the process of the rehabilitation, the more confidence you will feel when returning to play.
- » **Trust your body.** Trusting your body is so critical. There may be others who feel you should be farther advanced, but you need to go at your pace. If you are working with a sports psychologist and mental obstacles are blocking your return, that is a different issue. No one knows your mind and body like you do. Trust your body.
- » **Recognize the difference between soreness and pain.** There is a difference between the soreness that you experience when coming back from an injury and true pain. Soreness is to be expected. You have not used certain muscles in a while and retraining them may bring about soreness. Sometimes it can take weeks to get your endurance back; this piece has nothing directly to do with your injury. Pain, on the other hand, may be telling you that you may need to slow down a bit. It may be telling you to consult your physical therapist or other medical personnel to make sure you are not pushing too hard, too fast.

- » Defining mindfulness
- » Understanding what mindfulness is and isn't
- » Understanding how mindfulness can help improve performance
- » Developing a game plan to improve your ability to be mindful

Chapter **12**

Tool #7: Sharpening Awareness: Being Mindful

The word *mindfulness* has become more prevalent in day-to-day language than ever before. We discuss mindfulness with many of our clients and many have heard of mindfulness and agree that it is important, but it is hard for people to define *exactly* what it is. We attempt to define it in this chapter, in simple language, but we know that there have been many other books written on mindfulness, including *Mindfulness For Dummies* by Shamash Alidina (Wiley). Thus, we define it in as simple terms as possible and then discuss how we use this tool with our athletes so that they can have another technique at their disposal for peak performance.

With our athletes, coaches, and performers, we simply try to keep the term mindfulness related to the following ideas — being in the present moment and being accepting of your thoughts. When we are in the present moment and accepting of what “is,” without judgment, this is a state of mindfulness. For example, when athletes make mistakes, they are often self-critical (the opposite of non-judgmental and accepting) and focus on the past (once the mistake has occurred,

even if just ten seconds ago, it is now in the past and not in the present moment). Athletes and performers, and all people for that matter, in whatever their performance — an athletic competition, musical performance, giving a speech, or taking an exam — perform better when they are in the present moment and in a non-judgmental, accepting state. When we are self-critical or critical of others or we are obsessing about a past mistake and worrying about the future, we are putting ourselves in a state of mind that promotes anxiety and tension.

For example, when you feel overly nervous about an upcoming game, try to be more mindful and pay close attention to what is happening (racing thoughts, worry, or tight muscles as a result of the worrying thoughts) and simply bring your mind, heart, and body back into the present moment. When you are able to do this, you have brought your attention under control again, and you can then allow your muscles to relax, your thoughts to slow down or quiet altogether, and actually be in the moment. When you take control of your ideal mental state by being mindful, your worry about the outcome of competition (which you cannot control) lessens.

As you get better at doing this practice, your mind, body, and heart get into a more ideal state and mindset — one that allows you to compete the way you desire and one that demonstrates and allows your true skill level to be on display. There is no judgment or criticism going on in your head and you are in the present moment, which is ideal for all performers. In fact, when you think back to some of your best performances, there are probably two qualities that describe what you were experiencing — presence and non-judgmental thinking.

Being Mindful in the Moment

When you are mindful, you are actually aware, present, and in a non-judgment or accepting state of mind. You are “in the moment.” You are not thinking about how you or someone else made a mistake or worrying about the future or the outcome of the competition, game, or match. You are completely immersed and one with the present moment. Does this not sound incredible!?

The key to all of this is to realize that mindfulness is a skill that needs to be practiced your entire athletic career. Even masters of meditation (which is basically advanced mindfulness) describe times when they are not in the present moment and are being judgmental and self-critical, and these are individuals who spend hours a day practicing mindfulness skills! Practicing mindfulness needs to be part of your weekly routine, just like fitness and skill development. You have spent a lot of time preparing your skill and fitness for peak performance and you still

make mistakes. The same is true with mindfulness. However, with consistent and effective practice, you will become better at being mindful.

Keep in mind also that your frame of reference will be slightly different: you are training for increased “moments” of mindfulness during competition as opposed to longer periods of time, such as periods or halves or entire games. The more mindful moments you can build into your competition, the better you’ll be as a competitor!

Using mindfulness to change your mind, heart, and body

Chapter 2 discusses how athletes describe being present, aware, and “just being” when they are performing their best. Many times they are using mental training, such as mindfulness, to get into their hearts and bodies and out of their heads. And, as most athletes will attest, when you perform your best, you aren’t thinking about anything other than competing.

We are in a day and age when we are taught to be critical of others (through comparisons, such as on social media platforms). We are constantly encouraged to overthink, solve problems, and take in more and more information than our brains can process in any given moment. The information overload that everyone experiences today, especially when we all have a smartphone in our hands most of the day, overwhelms us, even if we don’t realize it. When we are better at being mindful, we realize that many of the challenges and answers to being better involve reconnecting with our body and getting out of our heads. In some ways, we are training our athletes to think less by reconnecting with their basic physiological processes such as breathing.



ANECDOTE

Todd uses mindfulness training with his athletes on a frequent basis. He discusses the importance of its practice. Mindfulness is finding its way into all aspects of life — to help people feel less anxious, to help people heal from and prevent disease, to help them make better decisions, to improve sleep, or to be better in relationships and perform better in school or work. Todd has recently discussed and put in place a mindfulness program whereby the team spends about 10–15 minutes practicing mindfulness and then are encouraged to practice and be intentional about mindfulness throughout their days when they are not at practice. When student-athletes practice mindfulness during actual practices, it helps them be more mindful out of practice and vice versa. During the pandemic, these athletes had an opportunity to practice mindfulness more often and they described feeling less anxiety, having more sharp and crisp practices, performing better, and having more relaxed and calm performances. When Todd started with the team face to face again, most of the players described the positive changes they experienced

in the past year and welcomed the challenge to keep this practice going. They and the coaches described how they feel they can now compete near the top of the conference, something they have not done in almost 10 years. The positive outcomes of this practice include less overthinking about their swings, being less critical about poor shots and mistakes, and not worrying about the score as much.

Improving your sports performance

When you practice mindfulness, it helps you to become more accepting of whatever you are thinking and feeling in the moment, more adept and aware of being present, and more accepting of whatever happens to you, without judgment. Mindfulness is a powerful tool — so important that it gets its own chapter. Mindfulness helps you reconnect with your heart and body. When you are in your own head too much, your thoughts and judgements can become an obstacle to your performance.

However, if it were easy to be mindful, we would all be doing it. Mindfulness has been around for thousands of years, but humans probably need it more today than ever. We might use different words and ways to describe it, but mindfulness is a crucial aspect of better performance.

Slowing down your thoughts and emotions

The rest of this chapter outlines more ways to practice mindfulness, and it is important to see how mindfulness slows down your thoughts and calms your emotions — two important things that need to occur when you want to perform your best in sports. One of the simple ways to begin mindfulness practice is by slowing your breathing and heart rate down. This practice does two things — it slows your thoughts and calms your emotions.

You can begin by simply sitting in a quiet space and focusing on breathing more slowly while feeling your muscles relax. (We don't recommend laying down, because you can easily start falling asleep.) When you do such a practice, you are in the present moment. You can also practice accepting and not judging yourself when thoughts start popping into your head (such as “this is dumb!” and “what are you doing?” and “you won't be good at this!” among others). And, they will! Our minds are like computers that never shut down. It is important to learn how to take control of this computer and ignore all the popups and advertisements, or it will run your life.

If you have ever practiced yoga, you have probably heard the term “monkey mind,” which refers to how our thoughts are like a monkey at the zoo, jumping from topic to topic. These phrases are used to describe how our minds function

most hours of the day. We are thinking numerous thoughts all of the time, most of which are random, useless, or self-critical! These thoughts have physical consequences — they tire us out and produce stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, which are normally supposed to be for our “fight or flight” sympathetic nervous system response.

This why many people are stressed and anxious today, because their minds are constantly on. The more you practice something, the more it becomes a habit, good or bad. This is not a good thing when it comes to athletic performance. How can you expect to perform at high levels when you are exhausted and unfocused because your “monkey mind” is running the show?



REMEMBER

Athletes and coaches need to slow down and be intentional about managing their thoughts in order to become more mindful. It is important to manage your thoughts in order to slow breathing down, which slows your heart rate and calms your emotions. There are always times and places for thinking, but the fast-paced athletic field is not one of them. Mindfulness practice will slow your monkey mind down — and you will learn how to place your mind more consistently in a state of acceptance and presence. This will help you compete and practice better and become a better player, since your body will be relaxed and can react quickly. It is not enough to simply hope that the skill of mindfulness just happens. That would be like hoping you can run a 5K in a cross country meet in sub-18 minutes without having run at all. The rest of the chapter covers various ways to practice and improve your ability to be more mindful.

Practicing Mindfulness

This section outlines some effective ways to prepare and practice mindfulness so you can bring this tool into your everyday life.

Practicing mindfulness off the field

Consider these techniques for practicing mindfulness off the field.

Mindful breathing



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One of the simplest ways to practice mindfulness is through breathing. When you simply pay attention to your breathing, it brings you into the present moment and relaxes you physically. The key is slow, controlled breathing. When you breathe slowly, you activate your *parasympathetic* nervous system, which is the metaphorical brake to your *sympathetic* nervous system, which serves as the gas pedal. Each is needed in balance, and spending time learning to activate your parasympathetic

nervous system is crucial to achieving balance. There are many ways to slow down your breathing. More times than not, your breathing is too shallow because of your racing thoughts, which activate your sympathetic nervous system, causing you to feel stress or anxiety.



TIP

You can slow your breathing down from a common 15–20 breaths per minute to a slower six breaths per minute by doing the “5–5–technique.” This is where you inhale for five seconds and then exhale for five seconds. In doing so, you bring the amount of breaths to six per minute, which is the ideal rate for activating the parasympathetic nervous system (the brakes, remember!). You can do this anywhere — in the classroom, when you get up from bed or go to bed, when you are walking from class to class, or even when driving in your car. Push yourself to see if you can do it for at least 5 minutes per session, twice daily.

You do need to practice intentional, mindful breathing, even though it is an automatic process. In our busy, hectic, and perfectionistic society, we breathe with a shallowness that deprives us of much-needed oxygen, increases our heart rate, and triggers the release of stress hormones. Mindful breathing practice is the antidote!

Mindful eating

Mindful eating is another way to slow down and be present. This is a technique that you obviously do not practice while competing, but when you do eat off the field, it enhances your presence and ability to be mindful on the field.

How many times do you simply shove food down your throat and not even taste it because you are in a hurry? You are cramming food (many times unhealthy food) into your mouth when you are racing off somewhere in the car, running to practice, in between classes or meetings, or simply when you are watching YouTube videos. One of the easier ways to add mindfulness to your routine is when you’re eating, which is something you do every day. Consider these simple tips to practice eating more mindfully:

- » **When you are eating, slow down.** Be conscious of chewing and tasting and smelling your food. Notice how many bites you take, the textures of the food, and the different interaction of tastes on your tongue (bitter, sweet, sour, and so on). Deliberately slow yourself down and try to be present during the eating process.
- » **Do not engage with your phone, a television, or any entertainment while you eat.** The idea is to sit and practice being present during the process of eating.

» **Be more mindful about the types of food you eat.** Choose nutritious foods that build and repair your body instead of processed foods that are packed with artificial ingredients and sugar, which are toxic. You can also commit to smaller, more appropriate portion sizes, which in combination with slowing down, will establish better eating habits.

Mindful walking and exercise

Even though it may seem like doing two things at once can be challenging, you can practice mindfulness when walking, and yes, even when exercising! Again, you are going to walk and exercise anyway, so why not add a mental skill to your training at the same time?

This is another simple way to practice mindfulness, especially because you probably walk around mindlessly on a daily basis anyway. How often do you slow down and noticing how you walk? Most of the time you are rushing to get somewhere and do not even remember the time between two different points. Start by being aware of your body's sensations, such as breathing, heart rate, and the feel of your feet as they hit the ground. Notice your pace, the length of your steps, the swing of your arms, and which side of your feet touch the ground first. Mindful walking is a great way to practice mindfulness.

By the same token, you have to exercise as an athlete anyway, so why not practice mindfulness at the same time? You may often be focused on the pain or just getting through the practice drills. What if you were able to be present and feel and enjoy the process? There are certain exercises that make mindfulness easier — such as walking and yoga — but you can be mindful when running as well. Yes, you do need to pay attention to technique to get better and not hurt yourself, but there is also a great opportunity for being mindful when you are exercising and training.



ANECDOTE

One of Leif's best weight lifting workouts ever was when he decided to listen only to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata and deliberately reduce the weight on all his lifts while slowing down his reps. He focused on strict form, and a nice, smooth, slow tempo as he worked out. It was the most enjoyable lifting session he has experienced! (And he was sore for a week following!)

Mindful meditation

Try intentionally slowing your mind and body down with silence or some sort of guided imagery or meditation. This exercise helps you become more present and will translate into the field of play. This is simply where are listening to a meditation lead by someone else, such as on YouTube or one of the phone apps such as Headspace, and you are guided to slow down your mind, body, and breathing.

These are very helpful ways to start a mindfulness practice, because they guide you and enable you to experience the sensations and feelings of being in a present and accepting space. Many people find it easier to start meditating when someone else is guiding and teaching them how to do it. If that describes you, try downloading an app.

Imagery

This is a specific way to create silence and imagine being present and mindful. Some athletes even read guided imagery scripts as a way to slow their minds and become present. Chapter 7 discusses imagery in detail, and it's an extremely important tool for improving performance and mental state such as confidence. It also can improve your mindfulness practice. Two of the important keys to helping your imagery practice are being present and accepting whatever enters your mind.



TIP

You can choose any activity to practice being mindful. Todd works with a college student-athlete who happens to be an art major, and he uses his time in the studio on his assignments as a way to be more mindful. He immerses himself in the painting and drawings. That is when he produces his best artwork as well as when he plays his best baseball. There can be many activities — putting a puzzle together, cooking, or any other hobby you have — that you can use to practice mindfulness. Hobbies are a great exercise in mindfulness, because they exist solely for the pleasure of doing them!

Practicing mindfulness on the field

There are numerous ways to be more mindful on the field in competition or in practice. The key in the beginning is to be intentional about doing so during practice, which is where you work on your physical skills. You might as well start working on this mental skill too.



REMEMBER

Being mindful and present takes practice, just like your athletic skills take practice. You will never reach a place where you can stop practicing. Because being present is such a challenging skill, it requires consistent practice.

One of the ways to be intentional is to create a habit to start and end your practices by journaling. In this journal, you can spend as much or as little time as you like, but use it to remind yourself to be present that day in practice — listen fully to your coaches, feel the sensations in your body as you work on techniques, and accept and be non-critical of yourself while you practice. Then, after practice, you can slow down and assess how well you did in the practice of mindfulness.

If you were not that present and you were self-critical, you can still be mindful — by being present and not judging yourself for these events during that practice. Again, you need to practice being mindful consistently for as long as you play your

sport. Skills that are not practiced deteriorate over time, after all. Mental skills are no different. You would never stop practicing your sport skills and therefore you should not stop practicing your mental skills.



TIP

One way to measure your mindfulness training during practices is to use what are called *Likert scales*. They can run from 1–5 or from 1–10, and you use them to rate yourself. Make sure you establish what each number means on that scale, though, so that you are consistently rating yourself and can accurately measure your progress. For instance, on a 1–10 Likert scale, 1 might be defined as “not able to be mindful at all,” 5 might be “I was mindful sometimes,” and 10 might be “I was mindful the entire practice.” By defining the scale metrics in this way, you give yourself a reliable way to note your level of mindfulness.

You want to also be mindful during competition so being intentional about how you practice is very important. The more you practice mindfulness on and off the field of play, the better your chances of being in this state when competing. Most athletes — when they are competing their best — describe being in a mindful state. Focus on mastering your techniques or footwork and think less about the outcomes of competition. This is the essence of being mindful during competition.



ANECDOTE

Todd encourages coaches to take a few minutes every practice to simply tell all of the athletes they are coaching to stop and be present — and to notice what they are thinking and feeling, their body sensations, whether they are present and focused, or if they are being accepting or critical of themselves.

Developing a plan of action for improving mindfulness

The best way to get better at something is to have structured routines and processes in place to practice it. This is especially true of the tools in this book. As an athlete, your tendency is to start with your sport skills practice, then move on to fitness levels, and then maybe focus on mental skills. This is not your fault because this is the way athletes have been trained for a long time, but the more you can put into place habits and routines for developing mindfulness (and any of these tools in this book), the better and more quickly they will work for you. If you work it, it will work for you.

Prepare daily and weekly routines

Routines help you focus and structure your skill development. To begin, find out which of the mindfulness routines resonates with you most. You might like a certain way of doing things because it makes sense to you. Then, it is a matter of putting a plan in place so that you practice it on a regular basis.

The following simple example is adapted from one of our student-athletes and you can use it or modify it as you see fit. This athlete followed this plan for two weeks and then slightly changed it every two weeks thereafter. She did some of the same things, but she also added or subtracted aspects to mix things up, or when she found new ideas or found that some things were not working for her.

Two-week mindfulness training plan

Mindfulness before practice three days per week: Spend 2–3 minutes before practice, slowing down your mind and body with basic breathing and reminding yourself to bring it into practice.

Monday–Wednesday–Friday: When you get up in the morning, eat your breakfast slowly and mindfully. Avoid phone time and instead sit in the quiet and notice things as you eat.

School: When you are walking in between classes, pay attention to your breathing and your walking pace. Take your time if you can. Let go of the clamor and noise in your head as you prepare for your next class.

Twice weekly: Practice imagery. Get your mind quiet and relax. Then visualize yourself performing in the exact manner you would like during your next competition.

Journal after practice: After at least two practices per week, slow down and allow yourself to be present and accepting of your thoughts. Take your time journaling about what you did well in the game or practice, what you learned, and one thing that you can do in the next 24 hours to get better.

Write the word *MINDFUL* on a piece of athletic tape and wrap it around your wrist before practice so that you can continue to see it during practice.

Develop a strong practice plan

Every athlete has a different approach and style to getting better. One of the things we believe, however, is that the more structure and the more routines you have around developing mindfulness skills (and all tools in this book, for that matter), the quicker your progress will be and the better athlete you will become.

The key, as shown in the student-athlete example above, is to set things in place at certain times and places and to do so before the week begins. Sunday is a good time to revisit or develop your mental plan for the next week or two. What are you going to practice? How are you going to practice it? When? Where? Why? Remember, the more detailed your plan, the easier it will be to execute it. Your weeks and days are busy enough, and one of the great hallmarks of successful athletes and people is that they are disciplined with their training methods and routines.



Hot Topics in Sports Psychology

IN THIS PART . . .

Learn the basics about important mental health issues facing athletes today

Find ways to manage your stress more effectively

Consider these things when making the big jump from high school to college sports

Use applied sports psychology in your everyday life

Learn the different paths to consider if you want to become a sports psychologist

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Debunking common myths about mental health issues with athletes
- » Understanding and identifying anxiety issues
- » Understanding and identifying depression issues
- » Understanding and identifying eating disorders
- » Getting help when you need it

Chapter **13**

Talking About Mental Health Issues

Mental health struggles happen to the best of us. This includes athletes and coaches, from weekend warriors all the way up the ranks to professionals in every sport. When athletes suffer from mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression (which happen to everyone at some point), it can be difficult for them to get going every day, much less practice their sport of choice. In fact, mental health issues are one of the biggest impediments to improved performance in the athletes we work with on a daily basis. However, through proper education and by debunking the popular myths surrounding mental health issues, you can begin to understand the complex interaction between common life issues and sports performance.

Reality Check: Mental Health Issues Affect Today's Athletes

You've read about it in the news: top athletes who takes themselves out of their sport due to mental health issues. Or, perhaps you've read about the increasing number of athletes who are leaving their sport entirely due to mental health concerns. Maybe you've also seen the ads on television that feature famous Olympians or professional athletes advocating therapy. Needless to say, it is becoming increasingly clear that mental health issues are having a profound effect on today's athletes, no matter their level of sport participation.



WARNING

In more recent sports, two very famous athletes — Olympic gymnast Simone Biles and tennis star Naomi Osaka — have brought much light to the area of mental health among athletes. They have lived in courage by stepping forward and discussing their challenges on a world stage. This is where change can begin. We need to discuss these mental health issues because we all deal with them at some time or another. Athletes are not superhumans; they have struggles like everyone. As a society, we need to accept that it is okay!

It's critical that we keep the mental health discussion alive, so that no athlete has to feel anxious or is unable to seek help from a sports psychologist. To do our part in this discussion, and to help educate people about the issues facing athletes these days, this chapter discusses anxiety, depressive disorders, and eating disorders. These three issues are, unfortunately, commonplace in sports.

Once you have a better understanding of how anxiety, depression, and eating disorders manifest themselves in athletes, you can better understand how treatment works. If you're a coach or parent, you can help your athletes feel better, and ultimately, perform better in their respective sports. If you're an athlete suffering from some kind of mental health issue, recognize that you aren't alone — and keep reading!

Debunking Mental Health Stigmas

Several mental health stigmas are common in the athlete community. These stigmas have done more harm than good over the years, but with proper education from sports psychology professionals and advocacy from top athletes all over the world, mental health issues are becoming normalized in athlete populations. Although the pandemic has exacerbated some people's depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues, it has also forced us to discuss and bring to the

forefront the fact that everyone struggles at times with mental health issues. Many professional sport organizations and colleges are bringing these issues to light. We are all human, after all. We begin, then, by covering the most common mental health stigmas we have observed in our work with athletes over the past 20-plus years.

Mental health issues are a sign of weakness

Athletes in general are taught not to show weakness, and although that culture is changing more and more, the pressure still persists. Usually, it is related to a bigger, cultural, or familial belief that mental health issues should be dealt with alone, if at all. For too long, this myth has caused athletes and coaches to hide, which only makes their mental health issues more severe and long-standing. Addressing mental health issues is a sign of strength, not weakness. It takes courage to do it, and it builds strength.

If you are mentally strong, you don't need to see a therapist/sports psychologist

Similar to the first myth about weakness, this myth persisted for years because of the misunderstanding about what sports psychologists do and how they can help athletes improve performance. Nowadays, we try to frame our work with athletes as something to be proud of, rather than something to be embarrassed by, and most athletes agree with us. Mainly because they realize it gives them an edge over their opponents who don't take advantage of such services. One of the ways that we have been helpful in making these worldwide changes is by being present and available to athletes and coaches in their realms, such as on the field, at practice, and at games, so that they can see and learn that this is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Sports psychologists and therapists will "mess up your head" if you talk to them

This is a common myth that might not even be articulated by many athletes but that nonetheless is still present in sports and athletic culture. It is common with athletes who have problems trusting people in general, so of course the idea of talking to a professional sports psychologist or therapist seems scary. This is why it is important for any professional working with athletes to perform a proper and thorough history and assessment during the first several sessions. This helps build trust with the athletes.

Talking about depression and anxiety makes you less of a person

This myth is, we are happy to say, going the way of the dinosaurs, thanks to popular athletes in the NBA and NFL, as well as Olympians, who have discussed their own battles with anxiety and depression. There is a saying, “we are as sick as our secrets.” We are finally learning that hiding and shoving things under the carpet makes mental health issues worse. Just as you depend on your coaches to help develop your skills, you can use a coach of sorts to help develop your mind and heart. In fact, your mind and heart are extremely important factors of your athletic success, as well as of your well-being in life.

Understanding Anxiety Issues

Anxiety is the number one issue that brings not only athletes but non-athletes into our offices, without a doubt. There are a host of reasons for this, and they all create more stress and the resulting anxiety. Issues related to social media, peer pressure, academic pressure, dating and relationship problems, and family of origin problems can all play a role, not to mention the pressure that comes from playing a sport and the personal, coach, family, and team expectations that can accompany it.

Defining anxiety

Anxiety can most easily be defined as an emotion characterized by excessive worry and anticipation, which, over time, causes physical problems like increased heart rate, muscle tension, and increased blood pressure in some individuals. It is especially common in individuals who tend to be high-achieving, and if left unchecked, over time it can lead to other problems like depression and panic attacks. People with anxiety often suffer from loss of or too much sleep, changes in eating and appetite, fatigue because of the constant worry, spinning thoughts that can't be turned off, excessive guilt when they have upset or disappointed someone, and a consistent state of self-criticism.

Identifying common anxiety disorders

This section touches on some of the common anxiety disorders that we come across in our private practices, and it is not meant to be all-inclusive. If you need more information, you need to do a deeper dive elsewhere. The American Psychological Association at www.apa.org is a good place to start.

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)

Excessive worry and anxiety occurring more days than not for at least six months, whereby the individual finds it difficult to control the worry. This disorder is associated with three or more of the following symptoms, present more often than not:

- » Restlessness or feeling on edge
- » Being easily fatigued
- » Difficulty concentrating
- » Irritability
- » Muscle tension
- » Sleep disturbance

Generalized anxiety disorder is such a common disorder that we gently joke that almost everybody can be diagnosed with it (us included!). As you can see from some of the common symptoms, generalized anxiety disorder involves chronic worrying, accompanied by physical symptoms.

Panic disorder

A disorder characterized by acute periods of discomfort, in which four or more of the following symptoms develop abruptly, can include the following:

- » Palpitations
- » Sweating
- » Trembling or shaking
- » Shortness of breath
- » Feelings of choking
- » Chest pain or discomfort
- » Nausea
- » Dizziness
- » Feelings of detachment from self
- » Fear of dying
- » Fear of losing control
- » Numbness or tingling sensations
- » Chills or hot flashes

Panic disorder is another anxiety disorder that brings many people and athletes into our offices, and it can mimic other physical diagnoses. For example, some people experience chest pains, problems breathing, lightheadedness, and tingling in the extremities, which are all also symptoms of a heart attack, so these individuals rush to the doctor or the emergency room and are confused when the doctors send them home with a diagnosis of panic disorder.

The key to this disorder, obviously, is the presence of panic attacks, which are acute episodes of extreme panic and the accompanying physical symptoms. They can occur multiple times a day, making them feel even more debilitating to the individuals, and they certainly can have a major impact on the quality of life for those suffering from them. However, there is hope. Panic attacks are readily responsive to therapy, and most people experience relief after several sessions with a licensed therapist or sports psychologist.



ANECDOTE

In the past year, Todd has worked with more athletes suffering from panic disorder than ever before. In fact, he has seen more athletes with panic disorder in the past 18 months than he did in the previous 20 years. This is partly due to the pandemic, but the fact remains that athletes have mental health issues, like we all do, and they need permission, like we all do, to be able to say they are struggling.

Adjustment disorder with anxiety

Adjustment disorder is characterized by the development of emotional and behavioral symptoms in response to an identifiable stressor or stressors occurring within three months of the onset of the stressors. These symptoms (cognitive, or mental, as well as physical) are clinically significant, which means that they impair everyday functioning (for example, making an individual unable to go to work or practice). An adjustment disorder is basically an extreme reaction to something significant happening in an individual's life (a major life change, for example, such as moving to a new house, starting college, or ending a sports career) beyond what would be considered "normal."

Understanding Depression Issues

Depression is another reason that athletes and individuals seek out our services. In fact, many athletes come to us because they have been diagnosed with depression, which has a tremendous negative impact on their sports performance. One of the hallmarks of depression, for example, is something called *anhedonia*, or, the lack of pleasure in activities that once were pleasurable. In this case, sports participation. Depression, like anxiety, has different manifestations, but can be just

as debilitating. Additionally, depression and anxiety can influence each other as diagnoses.

Sometimes, athletes are so anxious for such a long period of time that they get exhausted and become depressed. Conversely, athletes sometimes experience depressive symptoms for such a long time that they get agitated and anxious. We start by defining depression and then discuss two common depressive disorders we often see.

Defining depression

Depression refers to general extended periods of sadness and loss of interest in life (or sport) activities. It is different than your everyday, run-of-the-mill sadness. An individual who is depressed is relatively unaffected by positive events. When an individual is depressed, they are difficult to cheer up and motivate, which is why it can be so difficult to get them treatment. They don't want to seek treatment, and they can sometimes barely get themselves out of bed every morning.

Identifying common depressive disorders

The following sections touch on some of the more common depressive disorders that athletes — in fact, many people — suffer from.

Major depression

Major depression is characterized by the onset of severe depressive symptoms that last for at least two weeks. This depressed mood represents a change in a person's functioning and can include any of the following:

- » Loss of pleasure in activities (anhedonia)
- » Significant weight loss or gain (more than 5 percent of the individual's body weight)
- » Insomnia (sleeping too little) or hypersomnia (sleeping too much)
- » Fatigue or loss of energy
- » Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- » Diminished ability to concentrate
- » Possible recurrent thoughts of death or suicide, which is why the disorder can be so dangerous if left untreated



WARNING

Suicidal thoughts always require intervention from a psychologist or trained therapist. If you have thoughts of, a plan for, or a history of previous attempts of suicide, you should seek help *immediately*. There are professionals who can help you, at any time of day. If you or one of your teammates is expressing such thoughts, seek professional help. The National Suicide Hotline number is 800-273-8255. Letting your coaching staff know is also a good start.

Persistent depressive disorder (also known as dysthymia)

This depressive disorder is characterized by long-term but mild depression. It involves depressed mood for most of the day (more often than not) for a period of at least two years. Symptoms of persistent depressive disorder include two or more of the following:

- » Poor appetite or overeating
- » Insomnia or hypersomnia
- » Low energy and fatigue
- » Low self-esteem
- » Poor concentration
- » Feelings of hopelessness

To be diagnosed with this disorder, you can't meet the criteria for major depression.

Understanding Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are a less common but nonetheless important part of our work with high-level athletes. Eating disorders point to problems with body image (having a distorted view of how your body looks, for example) or problems managing the amounts of food you eat (too little or too much in a short period of time). We discuss eating disorders in this chapter because they are a common issue we see with athletes and they can have a tremendous negative impact on an athlete's ability to perform at their best.

Eating disorders and body image issues are particularly prevalent in gymnastics, swimming, figure skating, cross country, track, and wrestling. Although no person or sport is immune, we see these issues in these sports because weight is a focus in these sports and weight can be related to performance.

In addition, athletes in these sports are often judged while wearing tight-fitting uniforms. Although this is still primarily happening to female athletes (such as figure skaters and gymnasts), we see an increasing number of male wrestlers and football players dealing with eating disorders.

Weight can be an issue after these players retire as well. They can have difficulty slowing their eating habits down. When they were competing, they were working out every day and being monitored, but after retirement, there is less structure, less motivation to work out, and sometimes depression and anxiety related to their loss of identity as an athlete.

Identifying common eating disorders

The two most common eating disorders are discussed on the following sections.

Anorexia (also known as anorexia nervosa)

Anorexia is characterized by a refusal to maintain a healthy body weight, coupled with an intense fear of gaining any weight. Anorexia is the deadliest mental disorder, since the problems it causes (due to starvation of the body and lack of nutrition) can lead to heart failure and multiple other physical problems that require intensive medical supervision and care. The problems caused by anorexia can follow athletes for the rest of their lives, in fact.

Some of the characteristics of an individual who is diagnosed with this disorder include an abnormal and distorted view of their own body (for example, feeling that they look “fat” when they are seriously underweight), an intense, almost phobic fear of gaining weight, and a preoccupation with foods and calorie counts. Individuals with anorexia can be extremely difficult to treat and work with due to their refusal to seek treatment. After all, if they (the individual) feel that they “look good,” why would they need help from a professional? Most individuals with anorexia don’t believe they have a disorder, making it very difficult to treat.

Bulimia (also known as bulimia nervosa)

Bulimia is an eating disorder characterized by episodes of bingeing (eating extremely large amounts of food in a short period of time), followed by feelings of guilt or shame, and then purging (getting rid of it, usually by vomiting, taking laxatives, or excessive exercise). Individuals with bulimia can experience intense, multiple episodes of bingeing and purging, sometimes daily.

Unlike many individuals with anorexia, individuals with bulimia know and understand that they have an eating disorder, but they cannot stop themselves from engaging in the cycle of bingeing and purging. Although bulimia is less severe in

terms of prognosis when compared to anorexia, it nonetheless is a serious problem that should be treated by a professional sports psychologist or therapist.

Understanding how eating disorders affect athletes

Eating disorders have a profound impact on the health of athletes. In the case of anorexia, restricting calories in this extreme way depletes energy levels, can cause muscle loss and electrolyte imbalances, and can lead to heart arrhythmia. In most cases of anorexia, athletes cannot stay involved in their sport due to the potential life-threatening nature of the disorder.

Even less serious eating disorders can severely impact an athlete's on-field performance, as well as their off-field social interactions. Many individuals suffering from eating disorders feel great amounts of guilt and shame regarding their disorder and will go to great lengths to hide their behaviors (such as rushing off after a meal to go to the bathroom quietly and purge their meal). Thus, there are physical, emotional, and social consequences of having an eating disorder, which is why it is important to identify these problems as early as possible.

Determining when you need professional help

Now that you have read about some of the basic mental issues around eating that athletes face on a daily basis, you can understand why it is so important to stay on top of possible eating disorders and get the help you need as early as possible in the process. Much like medical care, the sooner you get help, the better the outcome down the road.

How can you recognize that you need help with your relationship to eating? Use the following list to help guide you:

- » Is your daily life impacted by this possible eating disorder?
- » Do you spend too much time obsessing over food and calorie counts?
- » Do you obsess about your bodyweight?
- » Do you get into arguments with friends and family over your bodyweight obsession?
- » Are your energy levels on the field (or court) impacted by your obsession and preoccupation with controlling your caloric intake?
- » Are your relationships damaged by your eating behaviors or beliefs?



WARNING

IDENTIFYING SIGNS THAT YOU SHOULDN'T IGNORE

When should you absolutely stop everything you are doing and get help? Consider these warning signs:

- You are experiencing severe physical symptoms, such as fainting, irregular heartbeats, or dizzy spells in the shower
- You are experiencing suicidal thoughts of any kind
- Multiple people in your life have plead with you to get help (or gain weight, in the case of anorexia)
- You find yourself pushing your friends and family away

Any of these signs are indications that you need to seek help — and sooner rather than later.

If you can answer yes to any of these signs, you should probably seek help from a professional therapist or sports psychologist. We have helped many athletes over the years who suffer from eating disorders (or what is called *disordered eating*, which is not as severe as a diagnosed eating disorder, but still problematic). Many recover and go on to live healthy, happy lives. You can, too! Remember, help is simply a phone call or email away.

Be proud that you are seeking help. You should be very proud of yourself. It is the first step to feeling better, and ultimately, performing better in your sport. Suffering in silence may seem noble, but it's actually tragic. It's tragic because it is needless — professionals can help you change your relationship with food, starting today, as long as you are willing to reach out to them. So, be proud, just as you would be when hiring another coach to be a part of your performance team.

Additional Mental Health Issues Facing Athletes Today

The main three mental health issues discussed so far in this chapter aren't the only problems that athletes have to grapple with. This section covers some other issues specific to athletes.

Loss of athletics and identity to athletics

This is not necessarily a “diagnosed” issue, but comes with mental health symptoms such as depression, anxiety, drug and alcohol abuse, and withdrawal from others. Every athlete’s competitive career comes to an end. Most end their structured career after high school. The career ends either because of lack of skill or a lack of desire to compete at the next level.

After college and especially after a professional career, when sports are all an athlete has known, it can be very difficult to transition to a new phase of life. We see athletes who struggle with this transition and experience depression, anxiety, panic attacks, drug and alcohol abuse, loss of motivation, and stress about a new career. Athletes sometimes stay in the professional ranks too long because they do not want to move on. Todd even co-wrote a book many years ago to help student-athletes in college begin to look at other parts of their identity.

Recovery from injury

This is another experience in which many athletes struggle with mental health issues. When an athlete is used to competing and having their body do what they want it to do, especially as higher levels, and then they become injured, it can be very hard to adjust mentally.

Injured athletes can experience depression and anxiety, especially when the injury keeps them out for several weeks or months. Some turn alcohol and drugs to cope. Even weekend warriors who look forward to playing their sport as a social outlet can experience depression when injured. When you look forward to these times and you are no longer able to do play, it can be extremely hard mentally and emotionally. We certainly have learned and seen how much concussions have interrupted and even ended the careers of athletes.

When an athlete sustains a career-ending injury, coming to terms with this can be one of the hardest times in their lives. Something that they have spent years, sometimes the majority of their lives, doing is no longer an option. This can be devastating and often requires the help of a sports psychologist. Unfortunately, many athletes suffer in silence for years and some have even taken their own lives.

Reliance on performance enhancing drugs

Many athletes feel the pressure to succeed at all costs. This is often based on making it to the highest level of sport for money and fame, or sometimes it can be driven by a need for perfection or a motivation to please or not disappoint others.

Athletes can overidentify with their role as athletes and do not want to experience a loss in performance or identity. They will take illegal and sometimes dangerous performance-enhancing drugs to help their performance. A survey taken among Olympic athletes revealed that many athletes said would take illegal performance-enhancing substances even if it meant they would die within five years of the Olympics.

Retirement from sports

This is another area that can lead to mental health issues. When an athlete retires, especially when they have competed since a child and have done so all the way through college or the professional ranks, it is sometimes devastating to let go. They experience fear, confusion, depression, anxiety, stress, panic, and a whole host of other mental health issues. It's normal to feel these feelings. Meeting with a sports psychologist can be one of the most freeing and greatest things athletes can do in such cases.

Knowing Where to Turn for Help

Not sure where to turn for help? If you are an athlete, a great place to start is with your team's athletic trainer. Over the years, athletic trainers have been our main referral source for athletes needing assistance. Why? Because athletic trainers work with athletes day-in and day-out. They see the athletes at their best, and often, at their worst, and they understand when an athlete is starting to deteriorate on or off the field. Seeking help from your athletic trainer is a great place to start. They are trained to help and often have resources they can connect you with. If you aren't comfortable with that option, consider one of these:

- » **Talk to your coach.** Although many (and almost all) coaches have little to no training in psychology or the medical field, they can be a source of referral to a team doctor, a psychologist or therapist, or the team trainer.
- » **Seek out school resources.** Uncomfortable seeking help from your team's resources? Perhaps there are school resources available, such as an academic or school counselor. They can point you in the right direction to get you the help you need.

- » **Contact your family doctor.** Most of us get annual physicals (and if you don't, you should be). During that physical, most doctors will ask you how your life is going. Why not tell them if you are suffering through an eating disorder (or a potential eating disorder)?
- » **Reach out to your parents and family members.** They may not be able to understand exactly what you are going through, but they can provide support and help you find good resources.



TIP

Parents know that parenting an athlete can be difficult. If you have concerns about your child athlete's mental health, make sure you contact a qualified sports psychologist for a consultation. If you cannot find a sports psychologist near you, a qualified therapist or psychologist can also help you and your child.



REMEMBER

In the end, the important thing to remember is that you are not alone, and that there are many people who can help you. Reaching out takes courage, but it is one of the best decisions you can ever make if you hope to live a healthy, happy life.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Setting priorities and achieving balance
- » Meditating and using imagery to counteract stress
- » Taking charge of your thoughts and emotions
- » Giving your body what it needs
- » Building a safety net of people to help you along the way

Chapter 14

Managing Stress Better

In this fast-paced world, you're being pulled in numerous directions. You're needed at home and at work, by family and friends, at your church or temple, by community organizations and your kids' T-ball team. And though the T-ball team, under other circumstances, would be pure fun, when you're driving at breakneck speed across town to make it to practice after your meeting at work ran late, it's just one more stress on a heaping pile of them.

Stress is a normal part of life. The key is how you respond to that stress. What can you do to cope with the stress of your hectic life? We have plenty of ideas, and we share them in this chapter.



REMEMBER

Research clearly shows that stress is a primary contributor to mental and physical disease. It is a slow process, but stress kills. How you handle stress today may not have immediate mental or physical effects, but over time, stress wears down the body and mind and “rusts” it out. If you run your car at full throttle and never take it in for a checkup, your car will break down. The same is true for your mind and body.



TIP

For even more information on managing stress, check out *Stress Management For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, by Allen Elkin, PhD (Wiley).

Setting Priorities

When you have a to-do list a mile long — and who doesn't these days? — you can end up feeling frantic (and stressed). One of the keys to combating this stress is to set priorities on a weekly basis.



TIP

Every week, on the same day of the week (maybe every Sunday night or Sunday morning, because many people experience the “Sunday scaries” thinking about the Monday morning start to the week), sit down with a calendar and a list of all the tasks you need to accomplish, all the meetings you need to attend, and all the deadlines you have to meet in the week ahead. Rank these items in order of importance. Maybe you absolutely can't miss that meeting at work on Tuesday afternoon, but you can reschedule your haircut to another day. Maybe you can't meet with your teacher on Tuesday, but you can find more time on Friday if needed.

Be honest with yourself about how much you can reasonably accomplish on a given day. If you know you won't be able to get it all done, look for ways to shuffle things around or ask for help from a friend, your partner, or someone at work. There are only so many hours in the day — make sure you don't commit yourself to doing more than is humanly possible.



REMEMBER

Some of your priorities are big-picture priorities — ones that will remain the same week after week. At the top of that list should be your emotional and physical health. The more stress you're feeling, the more important it is for you to nourish your body and mind. Make time to work out, spend time with supportive family and friends, pursue hobbies, and get enough rest and relaxation. When you're emotionally and physically healthy, you'll be better able to balance out your stressful schedule — and to handle whatever unexpected stresses come your way.



ANECDOTE

Todd has a client who sets her vacation schedule at the beginning of the year. She is fortunate to have four weeks off a year. The first thing that goes into her calendar in December for the following year are the four separate weeks she will taking off from work. She may not go anywhere, but she prioritizes this time away from work for her mental and physical wellness. You might not be lucky enough to get four weeks off a year, but that means it's even more important to make whatever time you get off a priority. Put it on the calendar first.

Striving for Balance

Good things come to those who are balanced. When you strike a balance between work, play, and rest, not only do you perform better, but you're better able to withstand the pressures and stresses of everyday life.

Muscles are grouped in pairs — the biceps contract while the triceps relax. Similarly, when you're actively engaged in play, you aren't stressing about work. When you're actively engaged in and enjoying your work, you aren't focusing on needing to play. And when you're resting, you're able to put both work and play out of your mind for a while. This sense of balance among work, play, and rest allows for better focus and concentration. Plus, you can pursue each activity with more focus and energy.



TIP

When you're setting your priorities for the week ahead (see the preceding section), make sure that you have a balance between work, play, and rest. If all your priorities are work-related, your level of stress will increase.



REMEMBER

There is no such thing as “perfect” balance. Your goal is a healthy, lower-stress lifestyle. Some weeks your life will be out of balance because of deadlines at work or team responsibilities, but make sure these times are the minority, and that they are balanced out by weeks where you fill your time with relaxation and fun. It is unhealthy for you to live life in the extremes on a consistent basis. One saying is “stay in the middle of the boat” because that’s where you are balanced. If you are on either end of the boat, you are going to tumble and fall into the water.

Adding Meditation to Your Routine

Meditation is a wonderful tool that many people use to combat the stress in their daily lives. Research has shown that regularly engaging in some form of meditation can reduce levels of stress hormones in the blood, lower blood pressure, and improve mental functioning. The benefits of meditation are enormous. And the best part is that the *form* of meditation you choose to practice doesn't really matter — what matters is that you do it regularly.

Most forms of meditation require you to sit quietly and focus on two things:

- » **The pace of your breathing:** While meditating, your goal is to slow your breathing by focusing on steady, smooth, and deep breaths, in and out.
- » **A cue word or phrase:** Cue words or phrases (such as *relax*, *one*, or *ohm*) serve to help you maintain focus on one thing.



TIP

When you first start practicing meditation, you'll notice that your mind wanders very quickly. When that happens, bring your attention back to the cue word or phrase immediately. Let go of the distractions that enter your mind and simply listen for the answers to your daily stressors as you sit quietly, contemplating and focusing on your cue word or phrase.

Start with 5 minutes of meditation and try to work yourself up to longer time intervals, such as 20 to 30 minutes. Take your time and practice it deliberately and slowly, since meditation is one of those topics that is much harder in practice than in theory. If you make meditation a regular priority, like eating and taking a shower, it will become habit and will give you the gift of top performance and a better life.

Another concept similar to meditation is *mindfulness*, which is the practice of being present in everyday life, from the trivial tasks such as washing dishes or eating to the more complex, such as working on a project or having an important conversation. Mindfulness also involves non-judgment — avoiding negatively evaluating yourself for mistakes or uncomfortable feelings. For more information on incorporating mindfulness, be sure to read Chapter 12.



TIP

If you're new to meditation and you aren't sure where to start, check out *Meditation For Dummies*, 4th Edition, by Stephan Bodian (Wiley).

Using Imagery to Reduce Stress

You already use imagery, whether you realize it or not. Every time you try to remember where you put your car keys, every time you think back to your last vacation with a smile on your face, you're using imagery.

You can use imagery to reduce the stress in your life by mentally imaging how you *want* your life to be, and by consistently creating positive, healthy, stress-free images in your mind. For example, Leif used to use imagery prior to his interviews for internships while in graduate school. He mentally rehearsed the questions he might be asked, how he wanted to respond, and his overall presence during the interview. To this day, he continues to use imagery prior to giving a speech or presentation, filming a video, or doing anything that might bring potential stress to his day.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

When you hold positive images in your mind, they cause your body to release *endorphins* (hormones that reduce pain) and chemicals (neurotransmitters like serotonin) that make you feel good.

In your daily life, try to form vivid images (the more vivid, the better!) of what you want your life to look like. The more you can imagine your life as you want it, full of joy and happiness, the more likely you'll be to actually create that life for yourself in the future. But don't just do this practice for the big picture. Imagine what you want your mind, body, and attitude to be like for an important conversation with your boss, a classmate, or a friend; when you're stuck in traffic; when you're

working toward an important deadline; or when you're at the gym. Imagery works for big and small things. (For more on imagery, turn to Chapter 7.)

Your body reacts and responds to whatever images appear in your mind. If you have images of failing or stress, your body will react with tense muscles, increased heartrate, increased thoughts, and more shallow breathing. If the images in your mind are more centered and calm, your body will follow with relaxed muscles, slower heartrate, and slower breathing. The key is to practice “consciously” putting into your mind the images that calm you. Research suggests that up to 95 percent of our thoughts and images are subconscious, so you need to take more control of implanting the images you desire and ones that provide for a healthy mind and body.



REMEMBER

What your mind perceives, your body believes.

Managing Your Thoughts and Emotions

Your thoughts directly correlate to how much stress you experience. Stress, after all, is simply an imbalance between your perceptions of situations and your perceived ability to cope with these situations. All your emotions flow directly from your thoughts. So, the key is to proactively manage how you look at the world. This is not as easy as you might think, since you probably hold many unconscious beliefs (thoughts) about life that are causing you stress, and you are not even aware of them!

Make time to notice how you react to various situations in your daily life. Maybe these situations relate to work, school, or a special relationship. Take a moment to stop and label what you are feeling (such as “I am feeling frustrated”) and then take another moment to figure out what thoughts are causing you to feel this way (“I am feeling frustrated because my boss shot down my great idea”). Doing this little exercise consistently will help you start noticing how reactive you are in your everyday life. After all, your boss’ behavior is out of your control, and you don’t like feeling frustrated, so why think of it in a way that makes it personal? Why not change your thought instead to “My boss’ inability to recognize my great idea isn’t a reflection on me, it’s a reflection on them.”?

Basically, you have two ways to look at every situation: up or down. You can see the positives in the situation, or you can focus on the negatives. These two paths result in opposite emotional reactions. When you choose to see the positives, you’ll experience more positive emotions, such as happiness, joy, and curiosity. When you choose to focus on the negatives, you’ll endure more negative emotions, such as sadness, anger, and despair.

We aren't saying that things should always be rosy, or that you have to bury your head in the sand when you face challenging situations. We just want you to know that you *do* have a choice in how you manage your thoughts and emotions and, in turn, your level of stress. And, when you have choices, you have power over your responses.



REMEMBER

Situations are not stressful in and of themselves. It's what you think and feel about a situation that makes it stressful. No matter who you are, you're guaranteed to face difficult times — any athlete knows this — but those difficult moments and experiences don't have to completely take you off the playing field of life. Manage your thoughts and emotions, or they'll manage you!



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Famous psychologist Albert Ellis created the ABCD model to understand this process. A is an activating event, B is your belief or self-talk, C is the consequence, and D is the action of disputing an irrational or stress-creating thought. Here is an example:

Activating event: Getting yelled at by your coach or boss.

Belief: Saying to yourself "I am never going to get in the lineup" or "My boss hates me and is probably going to fire me."

Consequence: Feeling angry, despair, worry.

Dispute: Are my beliefs (what I said to myself) accurate? Maybe the coach was having a bad day. Maybe my boss likes me and cares and that is why they are yelling.

It is easy to think that the activating event *caused* you to feel the consequence (C), when in reality, the split second thought in your mind ("My boss hates me") actually created it. Remember, situations in and of themselves are not stressful, but what you say and think about that situation is what makes it stressful. There may be absolutely zero truth to your beliefs (B), but they are creating a stressful consequence (C) unnecessarily.

Exercising for Stress Relief

Exercise is one of the best ways to manage your health. Plus, it's a natural remedy to stress. If you want to beat back the negative effects of stress, make sure you're engaging in some sort of regular exercise outside of any regular practice and competition you have. You don't have to work out like you're training for the Olympics to see the benefits of exercise. The key is simply to get your muscles moving, your blood flowing, and some sweat forming. Even something as simple as a daily walk with your dog at a slightly increased pace will provide cardiovascular benefits and decrease stress.



TIP

The key is to choose exercises and activities that fit into your lifestyle. Walking is one of the best forms of exercise because anyone can do it, just about anywhere and anytime. Keep to a walking pace whereby you can carry on a conversation with a friend. An activity such as rock climbing might be a great supplement to a sport such as wrestling, where grip strength is important. Playing ultimate frisbee might be a great way, also, to keep your cardio up in the offseason. Variety is essential!



WARNING

If you're feeling ambitious and thinking about starting a more elaborate and intense workout routine, get a medical checkup before you start, just to make sure that all systems are go.

You get exercise in different ways beyond going to a gym. You create movement when you take the stairs at work, when you clean the house, when you work in the yard, even when you cook dinner. Movement, not just exercise the way we traditionally think of it, is healthy for you.



TIP

If you're having trouble sticking to your exercise routine, partner up with a friend who can hold you accountable. If you know that your neighbor is going to be standing in your driveway at 6:30 a.m., ready to walk with you, you'll be more likely to drag yourself out of bed. If you work out at a gym, pack a gym bag and exchange bags with your partner — that way, if you don't show up for your workout, not only are you missing out on the workout, but your partner is, too! It is helpful also to reserve a space in your house where you can simply throw a yoga mat down and stretch. There are also numerous free exercise videos on YouTube.

Don't beat yourself up if you miss a workout once in a while. Just figure out how you went off track, and get back on track the next day. Progress, not perfection, is always the goal!

Making Sleep a Priority

Sleep is a key component to health. In fact, research has linked sleep deprivation with decreased immune system functioning, increased blood pressure, decreased mental focus, and even increased odds of on-the-job mistakes and car accidents! Sleep deprivation also reduces the mental and physical energy you need to manage stress. It even increases the release of stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol in the brain.

The problem with sleep deprivation is that its onset is unnoticeable and seemingly harmless, but the detrimental effects of sleeplessness are startling to your health over time. It usually starts with staying up late to take care of some pressing task.

One night of reduced sleep turns into a week, and that lack of sleep begins to pile up. If you miss one hour of sleep a night from your normal sleep schedule, over the course of a month, you'll have missed *four full nights* of sleep. Over a year, you'll have missed out on *50 days* of restful sleep! Yikes!

Another problem with sleep deprivation is that, once gone, you can never catch up. That's why it is so important to make good sleep habits a priority in your life. Use six hours a night as a baseline. Most people require somewhere between six and eight hours of uninterrupted sleep per night to function at their highest levels. The key is how you feel once you awake — do you feel rested? Or do you feel groggy and lethargic?



TIP

When you know that increased stress is headed your way (for example, around the holidays, when your workload is particularly heavy, during finals week if you're in school, and so on), or when you feel a cold coming on, adjust your schedule so that you get more sleep. The best way to do this is to go to bed half an hour to an hour earlier. This shift won't impair your normal nighttime routine too much, and it'll be easy to implement.

For some people, sleep deprivation is a result of their choices — they choose to stay up late to work, cruising social media, or hang out with friends or binge-watch Netflix — and simply choosing differently will alleviate the sleep deprivation. But for many people, sleep deprivation is a result of *insomnia* (the inability to sleep), often caused by anxiety and stress. And, unfortunately, lack of sleep can compound that anxiety and stress, which results in a vicious circle.

If you're suffering from insomnia, we recommend *Sleep Disorders For Dummies*, by Max Hirshkowitz, PhD, ABISM, and Patricia B. Smith (Wiley). Also, talk to your doctor. Sleep deprivation is a serious issue, and you owe it to yourself to treat it.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Research on sleep and athletic performance has been conducted for many years. Athletes sometimes need more sleep because they are burning many more calories and using much more physical energy. Studies have shown that when athletes get 8–9 hours of quality sleep, performance improves. In fact, researchers have found that, with better sleep, swimmers take times off their events, basketball players free-throw percentages increase, and golfers have a lower putts per hole average.

Sleep also affects mood. When you are not getting enough quality sleep, your mood darkens. Your outlook and perspective change, your ability to be resilient drops, and your performance drops, whether in sports, at work, in school, or with your relationships.

Cultivating a Support Network

Humans are social creatures by nature. We need each other. Don't believe us? Consider this: What's the most inhumane way to punish someone? Solitary confinement. Those old clichés about being a “lone ranger” or “going it alone” may sound romantic, but the truth is, they don't work. We are physically wired to need each other.

A key part of being able to cope with stress is having a strong support network. When you have family and friends who are there for you, you'll be much better able to survive life's challenges — and your level of stress will be reduced. Make sure you keep in contact with the most important people in your life. People who love and support you. For most of us, that equates to about a handful of people. Prioritize communicating with them. In this day and age, there really is no valid excuse for not being able to communicate with someone, after all! Doing so will help you stay connected and supported.



TIP

Get in the habit of making one or two phone calls every day to connect with someone. If you live with people — whether roommates or family members — try to have a meaningful conversation with one of them every day. These conversations don't have to be long — just a few short minutes can be beneficial. If you develop this habit of reaching out to people when things are going well, you'll be able to reach out to them when times are tough.

You might be thinking, “I can't call so-and-so. They don't want to hear about my problem.” But the truth is, most people are grateful you called for their help. Just think about how good you feel when someone calls on *you* for help. Do the same for someone else — help yourself and help them! You'll thank yourself down the road.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Physical touch with others we love increases oxytocin and dopamine in our bodies. Thus, a simple hug or holding hands with a partner can increase these two positive chemical in your body.

Laughing

One of the problems that can accompany success in any endeavor is that you can develop an over-inflated sense of yourself. You start to believe your press clippings, as they say in the sports world. Eventually, you start thinking you're bigger than life, and you take yourself too seriously.

The problem with taking yourself too seriously is twofold:

- » Life is full of ups and downs. When you set yourself on such a high pedestal, the fall is steep and inevitable.
- » You lose all perspective on what life is really about. You lose sight of the fact that nobody who experiences success does it without the help of others.

Research shows that laughter is one of the best medicines — it provides greater mental and physical health. You need to enjoy the simple things of life and laugh whenever you have a chance. Laughter is like a booster shot to your mental and physical health and to your immune system — every dose brings peace and happiness. Learn to laugh at yourself as well — you *will* make mistakes, sometimes dumb ones, but you don't have to take them seriously.

One way to do this is to ask yourself this question on a daily basis: What's funny about this (situation)? Leif does this all the time, and this powerful question always leads to a powerful, and funny, answer. By training himself to ask this question repeatedly, he teaches himself that life is best lived with a sense of balance between serious and silly.



Laughter has been shown to heal cancer. Todd has had to face down cancer in the past couple of years and has done much reading and exploration on healing. Laughter is one of the traits that has been shown to improve our immune systems and sometimes lead to spontaneous healing of cancer that the medical world cannot explain. Do we know if laughter actually cured the cancer? No, but the ones who have experienced healing will tell you that for them, it is exactly what cured them.

Practicing Gratitude

One of the best ways to manage stress is to practice gratitude on a daily basis. You have to train your mind to practice gratitude, but it's worth the effort, because practicing gratitude is one of the best and most effective stress busters.

When you lack something you believe you need or something you want and can't have, you feel stress. Think about it — how many times have you thought about wanting more money, a nicer car, a better job, more vacation time, or a new iPhone? This constant *wanting* creates stress because you're in a constant state of anxiety over what you don't have. Instead, practice being thankful for all the things, small and large, that you *do* have in your life. Many of them, also, aren't even "things."



TIP

At the end of every day, make a list of 25 things you're grateful for. Try it for 30 days, and you'll be amazed at how your stress level drops! Another way to go about this process is to simply write about 2–3 things you are grateful for and why. This is a more in-depth approach. Both work, but know there are many options to a gratitude practice.

Are you thinking that there's no way you have time to come up with 25 things you're thankful for every single day? Here's a list we made in less than three minutes:

- » Warmer weather
- » A hot, black cup of coffee in the morning
- » A hot shower
- » A cold shower (Leif loves these!)
- » Sunshine coming into the office window
- » A tasty sandwich at lunch
- » Almost no traffic on the way home from work
- » A phone call from a friend
- » An entertaining podcast on the way home from work
- » A great football game on TV
- » Good health
- » A good job with salary and benefits
- » Money in the bank
- » A new friend made this week
- » Children playing in the park
- » Funny text from a coauthor
- » Another chapter written
- » A delicious dinner
- » An hour of downtime with the kids
- » A supportive family
- » A short, refreshing nap
- » Flowers blooming in the yard
- » Ice cream

- » A new Netflix show to binge-watch
- » A new client to work with

Why does gratitude work? First, when you are grateful, you get into your heart. This takes you out of your head and into your body. We spend way too much time in our heads. We think that the mind is the only problem-solver we have, but that is far from the truth. Secondly, when you are in a state of gratitude, you are present. When you are present, your body and mind are in a good space and are energized and positive.



ANECDOTE

Todd makes sure his athletes and clients have a gratitude practice. When gratitude creates a state of presence, it is a great feeling. Athletes perform their best when they are present! Gratitude is a great way to practice presence and the byproduct is better performances and a better life.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding what to expect in college
- » Playing the recruiting game to your benefit
- » Finding the right coach and program for you
- » Making your first year a great one
- » Balancing sports, academics, and life

Chapter **15**

Making the Shift from High School to Collegiate Sports

There are numerous differences between high school and collegiate athletics, and they are important for you to think about if you are considering competing in the college ranks (or if you have already accepted to play at the next level). The decision and recruiting process is difficult and can be confusing, as you probably already know. Some of the major differences between high school and collegiate athletics are in the following areas: skill level, physical strength, mental prowess, time demands, coaches' expectations, competition level, social and academic differences, and personal, social, and familial pressure and expectations.

Determining What Division Level to Play in College and Where to Start

One of the first things that you need to think about is whether you want to play at the next level. You should attempt to play at the next level if *you* truly want to play collegiate sports. We frequently see instances where student-athletes end up playing in college (or end up playing at a certain college) not because they wanted to, but because someone else wanted them to. They wanted to meet the expectations of others or please others, such as parents, high school coaches, teammates, or friends.



REMEMBER

There are many things to think about when deciding if you want to end up playing at the next level and it can be quite a confusing process. The most important factor to make clear in your mind is whether *you* want to play at the next level. Playing collegiate sports is a huge commitment. You are agreeing to make this sport your life for the next four years. Make sure it's something you really want to do.

Choosing the division that suits you

One consideration is the level of play that you desire. There are three primary divisions of play within college sports — Division I, II, and III. There are numerous differences among these levels of play so explore the right fit for you.

As you may already know, Division I is the highest level of competition. There are most high school student-athletes who do not have the skill level to compete at the Division I level, so for many athletes, the decision to play below this level is made for them.

DI-level sports typically make the highest demands in terms of time, practice, travel, skill level, academic balance, conditioning, and outside expectations. That does not mean that if you attend a Division II or III school, there will not be these same types of demands, but there tends to be more balance. However, many DII and DIII athletes work just as hard and sometimes have even more commitments than Division I level student-athletes.



WARNING

Many DI student-athletes describe their experiences as akin to working a full-time job between their athletic and academic commitments. If you want to play at the DI level, it is very important to explore and discuss this decision with people you trust. There are numerous additional benefits to a DI college, such as resources available, notoriety, gear and “swag,” travel opportunities, highest level competition, and, nowadays, money via endorsements, and these are all wonderful. However, these perks should not be the sole reason you commit to a DI program.

The key here is to know yourself (your strengths and weaknesses) as well as you can at the young age of 17 or 18.

Seeking out advice

Knowing what is right for you and following your internal compass can be very difficult, especially when you are young and feeling outside pressure. The first thing to consider is how much you love your sport. If you do not *love* your sport, think twice about competing at the DI level.

It's important to have others whom you trust — such as friends, family, mentors, and coaches — and get their opinions before making a decision. This is also where a sports psychologist can assist — by helping you work through this decision. We help many student-athletes sort through this decision, in fact.

Many times young student-athletes say they want to compete at the highest level in college. They had a great deal of success and are excited to play at the highest level in their sport. Who wouldn't be? It is very exciting! But it's wise to understand what it truly takes to compete at the highest level. At the collegiate level, every member of the team is a former star high school athlete. DI athletics can offer glory, but that perceived glory comes at a price. You need to decide if that price is worth it for you. We know from our work with athletes over the past 25 years that the highest level of competition in college or even at the professional ranks is not always what it is cracked up to be. Many athletes decide to take a different path.



ANECDOTE

Todd worked with a very good junior golfer. He was recruited by some top DI programs when he was a freshman and sophomore in high school. As Todd was working with him, this young man was feeling pressure to accept some of these offers, but there was something holding him back. He felt much pressure from coaches, parents, and others' expectations in the junior golf world to take one of these offers. He certainly had the skill to play at this level. But Todd noticed that many of his reasons for attending these schools was based on pleasing others. Todd kept challenging him to determine *his* true desire. It turns out that this young man did not want all of the pressure and expectations of these DI schools. He had competed his entire life and wanted to focus on his education and have some balance in his life.

As it turned out, this junior golfer ended up choosing a DIII school, where he played golf and excelled in his academics. Although it took some convincing of his parents that he was making the right decision for him, they never regretted it one bit. As his parents stated after the decision was made, "We got our son back." He was so stressed for so long that he was not himself. Attending this DIII school, he had a wonderful time — he had the balance with golf and academics and friends

that he wanted. And he and his team even ended up winning the National Championship his sophomore year. Not too many people at any level of college sports can say they won a national title! He even went on to try to make it on the mini-tours for about four years.

Understanding the “Recruiting Game:” Getting Noticed by Colleges

One of the important things to know right off the bat is that you need to get noticed. Getting recruited is basically marketing yourself to future coaches and programs. For the majority of student-athletes, it is unwise to think that you will be recruited without doing anything on your own. There are certain athletes who are so good that they do get noticed in this way, but they are the exceptions. You will need to market yourself.

This means doing the work to make yourself, your desire, and your talent known to colleges and university coaching staffs. For example, you might be a star athlete in your home state on the East coast, but coaches on the West coast won’t likely know who you are. Most coaches have limited recruiting budgets and time. These coaches also know that many student-athletes stay within or close to their home state region, for many reasons.

In order to best sell yourself to college coaches, you have to get noticed. Here are some tips that can start you on your way:

- » **Create an athletic resume and cover letter.** This is simply where you highlight on paper your athletic and academic credentials. It needs to show more about who you are, what you have done, and why you are a good fit for that school.
- » **Make a highlight tape.** There are many ways to do this with today’s advanced technology. This is simply a short video placed online where coaches can see your movement, skills, competitions, and performances. It’s your video, so make it however you want!
- » **Use a college recruiting service.** There are numerous college-recruiting services available to help you with the college recruiting process and help put you in touch with certain schools. There are many of these services and, like anything else, some are good and some are not so good. Do your research and find a good one. A good way to do that is to ask someone who graduated or ask your coaches or mentor what services they recommend.

- » **Talk to your current coaches about your goals and dreams for competing in college.** Whether a high school coach or club coach or a coach with whom you do private lessons, ask them for their guidance and connections in this process. It truly does take a team to get you good enough and prepared to play in college, and it also takes a team approach to make the best of the recruiting process.
- » **Reach out to the college coaches yourself.** College coaches want to hear from you, not your parents. Many student-athletes are afraid or hesitant to reach out, because they lack the confidence to talk with college coaches and don't know what questions to ask. This is where we help our athletes in preparing them to discuss questions and interact with college coaches. Your current coaches can also help you prepare. Some of them, in fact, may have previously played your sport at the collegiate level, or coached at that level.
- » **Start early.** The higher the level of sport, the earlier you must begin the process. We are talking about DI level here. DI coaches will tend to recruit younger and earlier in the high school years and therefore you cannot wait until your senior year and expect to get an offer from a DI school. So, if your goal is the DI level, start early.
- » **Attend showcases.** Most sports have showcases, tournaments, or meets/ invitationals that are meant to showcase young athletes. These are good to attend so that you can have exposure to many college coaches in one long weekend. Make some contacts and introduce yourself. You never know who might be there watching you, after all.
- » **Know the program.** If you are seeking out a certain school, make sure you know about the program, the coaches, and your reasons for wanting to attend. The more a coach hears genuine interest and preparation, the more you will stand out. Just as athletes want to play for a program that wants them, programs want athletes that want to play for them, too!
- » **Go to a college summer camp.** If there is a certain school you want to attend, it can be helpful to attend that college's summer camp (if they offer one). This is a way to get to know the coaches, the school, and the program, and also a way for the school to get to know you.

Finally, keep in mind that you are interviewing a college athletic program as much as they are interviewing you. Keep a list of important questions you want to ask about the program and add to it as you go along in the process. We realize that it sometimes feels like the colleges and universities control the game. The reality is that, although there may be many colleges that say “no” to you, you will also say “no” to many colleges. Focus on what is under your control and remember that you have choices along the way.

Finding Your Perfect Fit: What to Look for in a Coach and Program

To figure out what you want in a coach or college program, start from within. This is the process of self-discovery. It is important to know yourself and the things in a college athletic experience that are important to you.

As you know your wants and needs, you can begin to pick from certain colleges and universities that fit your profile. This can be an enormous undertaking in terms of time and energy. We often work with high school student-athletes on this because this process is long, stressful, and sometimes daunting. This is not an undertaking that we recommend you do alone. Rely on coaches, parents, other college student-athletes, your friends, and your family members to help you during this process.

Some questions to consider along the journey:

- » Do you want to attend college closer to home (in state? An hour's drive?)?
- » What can you and your family afford? The fact of the matter is that most student-athletes are not on full scholarships. In fact, an extremely small number of them are. With the rising costs of college today, this is something that you must consider.
- » What are other ways to get financial aid?
- » Do you want to compete at the DI, DII, or DIII level?
- » Does the school have the potential field of study you might want to pursue? (Remember, all athletes become ex-athletes eventually, so you need an education to fall back on!)
- » Do you want to start as a first-year athlete (i.e., get significant playing time) or are you okay waiting until your junior or senior year to get playing time?
- » Would you be happy at this school if you weren't playing sports there? If you decided you did not want to compete any longer, would you want to remain at this school?
- » How do you feel about the coaching staff?
- » How do you feel about the current team and individual members of the team?
- » How do you feel about the history of the program? Do you like their reputation and culture?
- » How do you like the surrounding city? Do you want to be in a large metropolitan area? Or, do you want to be in a small, rural college town?

Making the Jump to Collegiate Athletics

As you can tell by now, there are many aspects to the college athletic journey. There are many factors involved and, for most athletes, it takes a tremendous amount of time and commitment to play at the collegiate level. You need to prepare in all three important areas of performance — skill set, body, and mind. If you want to compete at the next level, you need to focus on the details. Hard work and preparation always improve your odds of success.



TIP

The game (your sport) becomes more mental at the collegiate level. Because everyone's skill and conditioning are similar, the mental aspect becomes the differentiating factor. Preparing and training your mind and your mental game can differentiate you from other athletes.

It can be very helpful to talk with college coaches and future teammates to help you prepare for the college sport experience. Your future teammates who are already competing on the team can give you a better sense of the day-to-day living you'll encounter as a college student-athlete. Most programs will send you a lifting and conditioning program the summer prior to your freshman enrollment year.

You can also discuss how to prepare with a strength and conditioning coach or an exercise physiologist. It is helpful to begin building better habits now — fueling your body with proper nutrition, getting better from a skill standpoint, improving your sport IQ by watching film, and setting a regular schedule of mental training drills (including regularly reviewing the techniques in this book).

Approaching your first year

The following is a list of potential tips to consider during your first year of college. Although it isn't meant to be all-inclusive, it will give you a powerful head start on performing well as a college student-athlete:

- » **Approach your first year with curiosity and excitement.** You will probably be nervous about the unknown aspects of being a freshman student-athlete, but if you can keep coming back to a mindset of learning and being curious, your first year will be much better and much more enjoyable.
- » **Accept mistakes and difficulties as part of your learning process.** You are about to begin one of the greatest transition periods in your life! There are so many new things — living away from home for the first time, perhaps in a new city and state, with new coaches, new teammates, new roommates, new athletic systems and playbooks, new academic and athletic demands, and

numerous social adjustments. Go easy on yourself. You will make mistakes and have difficult practices and games. Make the commitment to simply do the next right thing and stayed focused on the process of getting better day-by-day.

- » **Be patient with everything.** With all of these new experiences and changes, you need to know that there is a certain time and learning curve that takes place. It will take you the first semester, and even the first year, to understand what college athletics are really like. You have not experienced these things before and until you go through them, you may not perform in the manner in which you are accustomed. That's perfectly okay.
- » **Be humble.** You may not be the superstar anymore. Many times, when you advance to the college ranks, you are not the best player on your team any longer. In many cases, you will find yourself surrounded by teammates who were state champions and some of the best athletes in the country. Your process for success is the same — training your body, skill set, and mind with disciplined focus and commitment.

Handling first year challenges

There are many things to consider during your first year of college athletics. Some can be wonderful experiences and others can be quite challenging. Preparation and knowledge will always make things a little easier. Keep these points in mind:

- » **You will make many mistakes during your first year of college sports.**
The good thing is that most coaches and teammates give you some slack when it comes to making mistakes, but not for long! As long as you work hard and demonstrate your commitment, you'll be okay in the end.
- » **Recruiting is over.** The reality is that everything is “puppy dogs and rainbows” during the recruiting process. Once you arrive, the hard work begins. You may find that your coach is not as nice or as patient. They may be very demanding. It is all part of the process, but just know that sometimes student-athletes can be surprised by this shift.
- » **Step up your physical game!** No matter where you attend college, the athletes will be stronger and faster than you've previously experienced. This is why it is important to begin the process of preparing your body for this new level of challenge. The physical demands are typically going to be greater, so start preparing now so the transition is easier for you.

- » **The changing social culture can be challenging.** You will be around a whole new set of people when you begin your college athletic career. You will have new coaches, new teammates, new training staff, new support services, and many other student-athletes and classmates you meet on campus. This can be exciting! Always try to extend yourself, especially during the first semester. One rule Todd remembers being told the first day at his college orientation was “Never eat lunch alone.” In other words, meet and be around people. These are truly what make the college athletic experience a fun and enjoyable one!
- » **New academic schedules can be difficult to manage.** You might feel like you have a lot of free time, but you’ll need to learn to manage your tasks and time well. The lack of structure that can sometimes accompany your first year of college can be nice, but it can also make for a lot of wasted time. Plus, you typically have more time involved in your sport so that means less time for social life and less time to tackle your homework and prepare for exams.
- » **Social differences will be vast.** In college, you will meet new people from all over the world and have many new experiences. This is one of the great things about college athletics and academics. That being said, you will also be in situations where you may be new or uncomfortable, such as a demanding academic and athletic schedule that you may find hard to balance with a social life. You will also be exposed to such things as alcohol and drugs (if you have not already) and you will be granted an independence you may not have not had before in your life.

Balancing Sports, Academics, and Your Social Life

Finding balance can be one of the greatest challenges student-athletes face. There are many demands made on them, athletically and academically. As a freshman, you are also experiencing independence for the first time in your life and your social opportunities are plentiful. You need to enjoy this first year, but you also need to stay grounded and have a good support team around you. It does not happen frequently, but there are still too many student-athletes who find themselves in trouble for certain social behaviors or on probation academically soon after enrollment. This is why you need support systems.

From an academic standpoint, many colleges have support services specifically for student-athletes, which include things such as priority scheduling of classes, academic advisors and coaches who keep a more watchful eye on you, tutors, study tables, and many other services. We recommend you take advantage of them all, especially your first year on campus. It can help to view these services as non-negotiable your first semester. After you have settled in a bit, you can choose not to use some of the resources, but make it a habit to utilize as many as possible your first year.



TIP

There are also mental health services available to help with the transition to college athletic and academic life. We recommend that you take advantage of these one-on-one services and/or workshops to help you cope with the changes and demands that college brings. Chapter 13 includes tips for staying on top of your mental health as a student-athlete.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Defining success on your own terms
- » Balancing work and life
- » Destressing and refreshing
- » Succeeding under pressure
- » Dealing with adversity and conflict
- » Building your support team

Chapter **16**

Using Sports Psychology Skills in Daily Life

The beauty of sports psychology skills and tools is that they can be applied in everyday life. Every athlete becomes an ex-athlete, and even non-athletes can benefit from the skills we teach the athletes we work with. In this chapter, we present you with some of these powerful tools.

Preparing for the Workday

There are numerous ways to use the sports psychology tools in this book to prepare for the workday and to improve your productivity. One of the first things that most people notice upon waking every morning is how their mind starts racing with worries, tasks, and fears. This is not a helpful or effective way to prepare for the day, just as it is not helpful for athletes to prepare for practice or competition with a racing or worrisome mind.

The key is to have an effective morning routine. Even if just for two minutes, having a good morning routine will start you down a path of developing healthy

mental and emotional habits. Try one or all of these routines to find the one that works best for you:

- » **Breathing.** If you wake up with worries and anxiety over your never-ending task list for the coming day, one of the best things you can do for yourself is five minutes of slow, deep breathing. One breathing practice that Leif recommends to his clients is the 5-5 breathing pattern, where you slowly inhale to the count of five and then slowly exhale, through pursed lips, to the count of five. Do this for five minutes every morning. It will slow your mind and body down so that you can start your day feeling centered and relaxed. The more stressed you are to start your day, the greater the likelihood you will make poor decisions (based out of fear and anxiety).
- » **Using imagery.** Successful athletes use this tool to prepare for competition and practice. We teach our athletes and clients how to practice this skill and make it an effective tool for combating stress. The key, like all things, is consistency. Take some time (about five minutes will do) and imagine yourself going through your day accomplishing the tasks you desire. Imagine yourself being successful and feeling calm, centered, and confident.
- » **Stretching and moving your body.** Athletes stretch and warm their bodies before they practice and compete. After a night of sleeping, our bodies need to be warmed up too. Basic stretching in the morning can prepare you for whatever is to come.
- » **Journaling or reading.** At the start of each morning, take time to read from your favorite book. Or take time to journal about things you are grateful for, starting from the very small (the weather, your cozy bed) to the very large (your health, your relationships) and see how big you can make your list. It only takes five minutes, but doing so focuses your mind back on feeling centered and calm and away from the worries and anxieties that pop into your head every morning upon waking.

Defining Your Career Success

Much of the stress in people's lives is due to not knowing what they want, and they live in fear of doing what they want, and/or trying to live according to others' expectations and values (i.e., make money, get the right job, etc.). We learn to fear making changes. There are certain realities to work and money and these coincide with our value systems, but it is important to take time to think about what career success really means to *you*. It does not have to mean money, power, control, or prestige — it may mean something else, like time with your family, value added to the lives of others, or simply a contribution to society.



TIP

The key is to be open to what is most important to you. This can and will change over time. Many people stay stuck because they are afraid of following their dreams. Just think if you spent less time on your fears and more time on your dreams? It can be helpful to work with someone who specializes in vocational or career psychology, but you also can use the tools in this book. Discuss and write about what is most important to you when it comes to your career. When you get more clarity on what it is you really want, you will be more motivated to pursue that path.

Balancing Work and Personal Life

Athletes do not perform to their potential consistently when stress and imbalance exists in their lives. Many people who excel at their work have difficulty being consistently effective and find that they fail in other areas of their lives because of stress, overwork, not setting boundaries, people-pleasing, financial stress, and many other things. Keep these points in mind as you strive for more balance in your life:

- » **“No” is a complete sentence.** To get balance in your life, you need to be able to say no — to other people, to commitments, to time requests, and to activities. You can say no and not give a reason. A simple, “I’d love to, but no thanks” suffices. When you say yes to everything, you’re saying no to the most important things. You don’t give those important priorities in your life the time and energy they deserve.
- » **Sleep and diet are crucial.** We tell athletes how their performance is partly based on sleep and diet factors. In the same manner, your sleep and diet strongly affect your mood, focus, and ability to manage stress. Make sure you are finding the time and energy to be more intentional about both of these factors.
- » **Meditation and imagery really work.** Developing a consistent meditation and imagery practice routine can help calm your nervous system, help you heal, keep you strong, and help you make good decisions, in and outside of work. Slow your mind and body down by practicing some form of meditation and imagery. All it takes is five to ten minutes a day.
- » **A coach or therapist can help.** We spend a great deal of time working with athletes to help them develop the mental and emotional skills necessary for managing stress and life. We provide outside perspective and help identify strengths as well as obstacles. One of the bravest words people can say is “help.” Seek out a coach or psychologist who can help you work through your blocks to success and thrive.

Concentrating Amid Distractions

Distractions are ever present. People are addicted to busyness and overactivity. We have short attention spans and find ourselves in a state of information overload — from all of the different apps and social media activities on smart phones to the transient nature of some relationships and work. Part of improving concentration is simply acknowledging that your focus is not where you want it to be. Many people think they are good at multitasking, but the fact is (and research proves it) no one is good at multitasking. There are always going to be times when it is nearly impossible to focus effectively. However, you do have choice. And the choice to slow things down — even in tiny increments — can make all of the difference in your life.



REMEMBER

Remember, where your mind goes, your (mental and physical) energy flows. If you are focused on negative things — how tough your life is and how you are not worthy of the good things that come your way — that is exactly where your energy will flow, along with stress, anxiety, depression, distraction, and lack of productivity.

Here are some simple ways to increase your concentration. As always, start small and celebrate small improvements. Soon they will become habits.

- » **Develop good sleep and eating habits.** As mentioned, a better diet and adequate sleep improve mood and concentration. Be intentional about improving them and your focus will follow.
- » **Create a mental anchor.** It is helpful to come up with a word, phrase, or mantra that you use to get through your day. Write it down and put it somewhere you see it, such as a sticky note on your laptop. Having something to anchor your attention — such as a word like “focus” or a phrase like “be present” — can bring your concentration back.
- » **Be intentional with your awareness.** When you go about the day, commit to improving your concentration. Even if it does not last more than 30 seconds, it is still improvement and it can get better each time. Like any muscle, your focus “muscle” gets stronger with practice. When you catch yourself being distracted, gently bring yourself back to the task at hand.
- » **Reduce distractions.** If you want to stay on task, set your environment up to win. This means finding a place to work or study that is quiet and clean. Turn off your phone, avoid social media, and commit yourself to 30-45 minute spans of work or studying.
- » **Set a focus alarm.** Throughout the day, set an alarm to remind you to stop everything and breathe deeply and slowly for 30 seconds. If you can go longer (such as 2-5 minutes), all the better. Simple things like this tiny practice can make enormous differences over time, as you are training your mind and body to de-stress.

Taking a Timeout from Stress

Stress kills. In fact, it is a leading contributor to the top two causes of death for human beings (cancer and heart disease). Research clearly shows that stress is an enormous part, if not the greatest contributor, to disease and mental health issues and certainly lower performance in work and life. There is a saying in psychology — situations are not stressful in and of themselves, but our response to those situations determines how we react. We frequently discuss with our athletes and clients how there is no pressure in sport — our minds manufacture the pressure. How many times does a field goal kicker attempt a game-winning kick? Many times. But the skill (kicking the ball through the uprights) is the same.

Pressure and stress are created in the mind by your choice of response. If it were that easy to simply live life and perform well, we would all be great at everything we do, but it is not and that is why these skills require practice. Here are some points to keep in mind when it comes to stress:

- » **Stress is not necessarily a bad thing.** Research shows that the “stress” we feel can be turned to positive and life-giving energy. This takes practice, but see if you can look at your stressful situation differently — maybe it is more positive than you think! Try to view a stressful situation as a challenge or an opportunity to grow.
- » **Sleep and diet matter.** If it seems repetitive, it’s because it’s important. Sleep and diet are critical to keeping your mind and body healthy. Try to do the next right thing when you realize these two aspects of your life are out of balance.
- » **Stay connected to healthy relationships.** We are living in a time where staying connected with others is challenging. We have the methods and ways to connect, but we don’t always connect on deeper levels. Find ways to stay connected face-to-face, whether it means talking on the phone via FaceTime or better yet, getting together for a meal or coffee or even better, engaging in something you enjoy with friends and family.
- » **Say no.** As stated, we all need to practice the art of saying no. Life is busy enough and you have to learn to set boundaries. Saying no means saying yes to conserving your time and energy!

Performing Well Under Pressure

Performing under pressure is probably one of the most common problems we see in working with athletes and clients. As stated previously, pressure only exists in the mind. It does not mean that you do not experience the symptoms of pressure,

such as tight muscles, increased heart rate, feelings of stress, and anxiety, but remember that it is not the situations creating that pressure. You create this in your mind based on what you are saying internally to yourself about the situation.

For example, golfers feel pressure when they are thinking “I have to make this birdie” or “I am done and might as well give up on golf if my putting does not get better.” In reality, the putt itself is a simple, everyday golf putt that they have hit thousands of times before. A putt is a putt is a putt. Whether it is stressful or not is up to that golfer. With that being said, here are some tips to improve your performance under pressure:

- » **Develop awareness and acceptance.** The first step is to develop awareness and acceptance around how you manage pressure. Know what your mind, body, and behaviors look like when you are experiencing pressure. Stay away from judgment. The best chance of you managing pressure better is knowing what specific situations make you feel more pressure, and then accepting your current mental state instead of criticizing yourself for feeling that way. Criticism only increases the experience of pressure. When you hide away mentally or beat yourself up for how you might ineffectively handle pressure, this blocks your ability to get better. Be aware, accept it, and then you can take action!
- » **Recognize the difference between reacting and responding.** Identify situations that create pressure for you. Write a description of how you “react” (more negatively) and then describe how you would like to respond (more positive) in these situations. Once you have this new image in your mind, you improve your chances of managing pressure. Teach yourself to respond, not react.
- » **Use imagery.** The skill of visualization or imagery is a great one. It needs to be utilized consistently in order for it to be effective. With imagery (you can read more about it in Chapter 7), you can begin to “see and experience” yourself handling and performing under pressure. When you visualize, make sure to see yourself in action (how you actually behave in the situation successfully) and try to experience the emotions you would be feeling in that situation (for example, calm, relaxed, poised, and focused).
- » **Improve your self-talk.** Monitor your self-talk. Your self-talk should always be positive (“it’s okay, you can do this!”) and task-focused (“My job is to get this report done and delivered by tomorrow.”). Identify what you are saying to yourself and change your inner dialogue to what you would ideally like to say, such as more rational, positive and encouraging things. Then, practice, practice, practice over and over again. Leif likes to have his athletes visualize what they would say to their 10 year-old self in that situation, and then say it to their adult self!
- » **See a sports psychologist.** We are experts in helping people understand pressure and its causes and consequences. Seek out someone who can help you sort through your bad habits, especially if those habits are negatively impacting your life.

Developing Effective Work Routines

Routines are critical to an athlete's success. Routines are like a funnel — once inside the funnel, your focus is maximized because it always leads down the same path. Routines are under your control and their purpose is to help you feel at ease prior to competing. In the same way, your performance in the workplace will be maximized when you have effective routines at work. There is no such thing as “right” or “wrong” routines, just effective or ineffective ones. Try to find routines that help put your mind and body in a place to maximize your performance at work. Here are some points to consider:

- » **Night before work routines.** These can include things such as going to bed at a certain time, journaling about how effective you want to be tomorrow at work, or a certain healthy activity, such as meditating, stretching, or making a list of priorities to tackle the next day.
- » **Morning of work day routines.** Again, think of routines that are helpful — getting up at a certain time so you are not rushing, starting the day by journaling or meditating to relax and calm your mind and body, having a good breakfast to get yourself energized, or exercising in the morning to get your body and mind engaged.
- » **At work organizational routines.** We all have different ways that help us stay organized and on top of our tasks at work. These methods can be planners, setting alarms or reminders on our phones, or setting boundaries on meeting length. Create routines that help you feel and stay organized. When you are organized, you feel less stress and therefore maximize your performance ability at work.

Focusing on Tasks Rather Than Outcomes

This skill is another one that takes practice each and every day. But, keep reading — just a few minutes each day of practice will get you focusing on the process (or tasks) to be successful rather than the outcomes (or goals you are aiming for).

Great outcomes are the byproduct of staying focused on effective processes/tasks. Focus on daily and hourly processes that create successful outcomes for you. Athletes often focus on the outcomes too much — winning, getting a scholarship, pleasing parents, impressing fans, getting sponsorships, being the center of attention, and so on. These things can make some people excited and ready to go for a short period of time, but for most athletes and people, it creates anxiety and distraction.

And, none of those things are under your control, anyway! There is nothing wrong with thinking about outcomes — it is sometimes very exciting and motivating. Just as an athlete focuses on getting better each day, you can focus on getting better each day in your job or career. When you focus on task or the processes that are under your control, you'll create success and become even more motivated.

If, on the other hand, you are focused solely on outcomes and those things that are out of your control, your energy will be wasted and misdirected and your chances of success plummet dramatically. Obsessing over outcomes creates stress and anxiety — not success. So, define what success is for that day or moment or project, then put a process or task list together that can bring that outcome to reality. Here are some guiding tips to do that:

- » **Make your tasks and processes small.** Think about a ladder, but with a rung so high that you cannot even reach it. Then think about a ladder with small rungs that you can easily step onto and upward, making small but continuous progress. You may take more steps, but you get to your destination faster.
- » **Celebrate the success of small task completion.** One of the things that can help you stay focused is to celebrate every time you finish a task. Celebrate with something, like a small gift to yourself. This action boosts the dopamine in our brains, which directly influences our reward center, causing us to feel good and giving us the desire to do it more often. Leif likes to do this by rewarding himself for tasks completed by buying a book off his Amazon wish list!

Read Chapter 6, where we elaborate on the difference between process/tasks and outcomes.

Coping with Adversity and Conflict on the Job

Adversity and conflict are part of life. It is not a question of *if* it will occur, it is a question of *when*, *how often*, and *how will you handle it*. There can be extremely challenging and difficult situations in the workplace. The first step is to become aware of how you handle conflict in general. Do a self-assessment. If you need improvement in this area, practice to get better.

Just like we discuss how to build resiliency and grit — the ability to bounce back from adversity and handle conflict — in sports, we also need to do so at work. Instead of a teammate, it might be a boss or co-worker that rubs you the wrong way, or takes credit for your outstanding work, or plays the gossip game.

Here are some tips to consider for building skills in this area:

- » **Identify what exactly is creating the adversity or conflict.** Many times, we do not know what is exactly happening and feel paralyzed to do anything as a result. Identify (through journaling or talking with a trusted friend) the conflict or adversity to see what exactly might be happening, and what your part in it might be.
- » **Journal.** Writing about the conflict and adversity can take some of the emotion out of the situation. This is what we do often with our athletes and clients. Todd calls it “emptying your head and heart.” Leif calls it “emotional dumping.” Once you do this, you experience some relief and can gain insight and perspective into the situation. You can determine how to best handle it moving forward.
- » **Take small steps.** Deal with a conflict or adverse situations in small steps. Outline small steps that will help you feel more in control and more confident about moving toward a solution.
- » **Communicate.** Interpersonal conflict is a result of a lack of communication or miscommunication in many situations. Therefore, when your mind and heart are in a more calm space, see if you can approach the person with whom the conflict exists and try to come up with reasonable solutions to the situation.
- » **Monitor your physical reactions during conflict.** When you are in heated discussions, your sympathetic nervous system (the gas pedal of our nervous system) is activated, which causes your blood pressure to increase, your heart rate to soar, and your concentration to diminish. You also get tight muscles and clammy or sweaty hands. These are all “fight, flight, freeze, or fawn” reactions, and you need to learn to see them coming and head them off. Attempting to have a conversation with someone when you are physiologically activated like this seldom leads to good outcomes. Thus, monitor your reactions, and if this happens, start pumping the brakes on your nervous system (which activates the parasympathetic branch) and cool yourself down prior to engaging with the other person.
- » **Accept.** It is helpful to learn and practice accepting that you have no control over most things in your life, and that includes other people, places, and things. You can take ownership of your own reality and processes, but that does not mean the other person will agree or see things from your viewpoint or that the situation will work out the way you desire it to.
- » **Make decisions.** There are times you may feel like burying your head and eyes in fear to the conflict or adversity. News flash — the conflict or adversity is not going away anytime soon. When you hide or run from conflict, it only worsens and becomes more problematic and painful to address. Bacteria grows in the dark, but when you bring it into the sunlight, it disappears. Take this approach with adversity and conflict.

- » **Monitor your voice level during conflict.** Remember this saying that Leif tells his clients: “The person who yells, loses.” There is nothing you yell that you can’t say in a calm, normal tone of voice. When we raise our voices and yell at people, they inevitably start shutting down (because we are causing a stress reaction in them!).
- » **Show courage.** Adverse situations and conflict are hard to manage and confront. Don’t beat yourself if you feel fear. Everyone is afraid. The key is to step forward in spite of the fear. That takes courage, and that is admirable!

Enlisting Your Support Team

Humans are not meant to live life alone, and you will never accomplish great things without the help and connection of other people. Being in relationship with others is one of the most important energies available to us. It helps drive and motivate us. There are different types of people you need in order to have a complete support team. You need people to provide the following kinds of support:

- » **Emotional support.** People who lift you up, listen, and help you emotionally during the hard times. They also celebrate the good times with you. These people can be friends, families, co-workers, and neighbors.
- » **Physical support.** People who can help you with physical tasks, such as getting your computer fixed, taking your car into the shop, or helping you fix something around the home.
- » **Technical support.** People who offer you knowledge and wisdom to help you on your journey. They may be employers, co-workers, or mentors, but they know about your work and can help you grow, learn, and get better, just like a coach does with an athlete.
- » **Fun and fellowship.** People who simply add fun and spirit to your life. They help you not take life too seriously. They can be neighbors or friends who you watch a football game, play golf with, or spend time together cooking out.



REMEMBER

Remember that it’s not all about what *you* need. In addition to expecting support from your family and friends, you also need to give support, care, and comfort to those you love. You don’t have to know all the answers, but try to be a good listener and make sure you are giving to others, in addition to getting what you need.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding what a sports psychologist does
- » Determining your career path in sports psychology
- » Finding internships and job experience in sports psychology
- » Finding jobs in sports psychology

Chapter **17**

Exploring a Career as a Sports Psychologist

We are frequently asked the question, “How did you end up as a sports psychologist?” Sports psychology is a fascinating and exciting field of study and work, and it has become an appealing path for many people who want to maintain involvement in the sports world, long after their careers as an athlete are over. As a career field, it is even more exciting to think that sports psychology as a more formal profession is only about 40 years old. Research on athletes and sports performance has been going on since the early 1900s, but the idea of creating a career around working with athletes and helping them improve performance in sport is a more recent profession. There has been much more widespread acceptance of the field in athletic departments in universities and high schools, professional sports, and in the general public. Are you excited to learn more about how you might join us in this wonderful and exciting field? Keep reading, and we discuss how you can do it and what sort of training you need to be an effective sports psychologist or sports psychology consultant.

Understanding What a Sports Psychologist Does

Sports psychology is the study of psychology applied to sports performance. That's a simple definition, right? Well, due to the ever-changing nature of sports, as well as the overall changing nature of society, the roles and tasks of a sports psychologist can vary dramatically. Sports psychologists usually work with teams and individuals, of course, but they are also called upon by corporations and those in the business world to assist executives and employees on improving performance in the work world.

If you think about it, our entire life is made up of a series of performances. . .we perform at school, in relationships, at the gym, in sports, at home, and in life. The same principles that apply to improving the performance of an NHL goalie can be applied to someone who is trying to improve their on-the-job effectiveness at a sales company. Pretty cool, eh?

What is a sports psychologist anyway?

Let's get technical here for a moment, because it is important: To call yourself a sports psychologist, you have to technically be trained as a counselor or clinical psychologist. A clinical psychologist has to attend graduate school and obtain a doctorate, and then pass the licensure requirements at the national and state levels. Once you do that, you are officially a psychologist. In fact, Leif has a doctorate in clinical psychology (PsyD) and Todd has a doctorate in counseling psychology (PhD). We are both psychologists, but we hold slightly different degrees.

Once you have experience working with athletes and teams, and you have developed competency in improving performance, you can call yourself a sports psychologist (in addition to calling yourself a clinical or counseling psychologist).



WARNING

This doesn't mean that you can automatically call yourself a sports psychologist after working with one team or individual; you need to be sure that you have put in the time training with individuals in a sports context prior to advertising yourself as a sports psychologist. This is important because you don't want to confuse the general public, who will assume you have experience working with various sports teams and individuals. Doing so before you are prepared can hurt not only your reputation, but the reputation of the field of sports psychology.

The requirements are more clear on becoming a "psychologist" — attend graduate school, put in a certain number of supervised hours of clinical work, pass licensure exams, and so on — but the requirements for identifying as a "sports psychologist" are less clear. There is still debate in the field of sports and exercise

science as to what an individual needs to do exactly. The field of sports psychology is still in its infancy and these areas will slowly become more developed over time.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

In the field of sports psychology, many people use the term “sport psychology” while others prefer “sports psychology.” For the sake of simplicity and continuity, this book uses the plural version: sports psychology and sports psychologist.

Where do sports psychologists work?

Sports psychologists typically work in university settings, as a part of a counseling department, or in private practice, with other clinicians or by themselves. Over the past 20 years, there has been an explosion of positions available at college counseling centers for clinicians with expertise in working with athletes. This wonderful development has created careers and improved the quality of care for collegiate athletes.

Some universities have hybrid positions, whereby the sports psychologist works part-time in the counseling center and part-time in the athletic department. This helps ensure funding for the position, which helps ensure that the position will be there for years to come. There are also sports psychologists who work strictly in athletic departments or with the sports medicine team in the athletic department, but this is a small, but growing, group.

The other setting in which sports psychologists work is private practice. This means that the sports psychologist works in a mental health or therapy center, alone or with other clinicians. This setting can be more flexible for the sports psychologist, because they can see “regular” clients (non-sports clients) as well as athletes. Many sports psychologists also teach as adjunct professors at universities (we have done that for years, in fact) in addition to running their own private practice. This allows them to stay on top of current trends and research, and to enhance their own learning via teaching sports psychology and psychology courses to undergraduate and graduate students.

Another setting in which sports psychologists work is the consulting field. When a sports psychologist is asked to work with a team (high school, college, or professional), they do so as a consultant. Additionally, since they are experts in improving performance, it makes sense that businesses or corporations might want to access their expertise for their own teams and executives. This is another example of doing consulting work as a sports psychologist.

Sports psychologist versus mental skills consultant

As mentioned, you need to meet very specific requirements from national and state boards of psychology to call yourself a psychologist. You cannot claim to be a psychologist if you haven't met those standards. However, it is much easier to become a mental skills consultant, since there are no licensing requirements attached to the term "consultant." Thus, a sports psychology consultant is someone who consults on the topic of sports psychology. This can include work with teams and individuals. Mental skills consultants are much more prevalent in the field of sports psychology as a result. A major difference is that sports psychologists are trained to deal with mental health issues, whereas mental skills consultants are not able to do so.



TIP

Sports psychologists can also call themselves mental skills consultants, but mental skills consultants cannot (legally) call themselves sports psychologists unless they are also psychologists.

Mental skills consultants cannot provide any manner of therapy or counseling to athletes unless they have obtained a degree in counseling or clinical psychology or related field.

The path to becoming a sports psychologist

The path to becoming a sports psychologist is very similar to the path to becoming a general counseling psychologist or clinical psychologist. Remember, a sports psychologist is a psychologist who is also trained to work with athletes, on top of being able to work with anyone else outside of sports.

To become a psychologist, then, you need to follow a general path that looks like this:

- » **Four years of undergraduate study.** You don't have to get a psychology degree, but you need to take what are called prerequisite psychology courses for graduate school. Thus, you can get a different degree, but you also need to make sure you cover the required courses that the grad school you apply to requests. You must have a BA (bachelor of arts) or BS (bachelor of science) degree.
- » **A master's degree.** Usually, a master's of arts or science in counseling or clinical psychology. (**Note:** Many programs offer a master's degree on the way to a doctorate degree, meaning that once you are accepted into the doctoral program, you will receive your master's degree along the way, as long as you meet the required classes and licensure expectations.)

» **A doctor of philosophy (PhD) or a doctor of psychology (PsyD) degree.**

These are very similar degrees, with the difference mainly being that a student in a PhD program follows a more academic course load (which may include teaching courses and doing research), and a student in a PsyD program follows a course load that is more oriented toward professional practice (less emphasis on teaching and research, although they are still required to do a dissertation, which a PhD student is also required to complete).

To become a sports psychologist, you of course need to develop further expertise in working with athletes. This can come in the form of a formal post-doctoral training year, or it can come in the form of informal training, as long as it's supervised by someone with expertise in sports psychology. Here is how that extended training and education might look:

- » Formal training might take the shape of a post-doctoral fellowship, which is a paid position in a sports medicine or university setting. Working under the direct supervision of a sports psychologist, you follow a structured training in working one-on-one with athletes and with teams, helping them to improve performance, and also working with them in a mental and emotional health capacity to work through issues such as anxiety, depression, or any other mental health issue that interferes with their performance.
- » Informal training could be more broad and might take the shape of working as a consultant with a local high school team, community college, or even working one-on-one with an athlete (while getting supervision, of course) to help them improve performance. Informal training can also take the form of getting mentoring or coaching by someone in the field. (We have taken on students at the undergraduate and graduate levels and helped them gain valuable experience working with athletes and understanding the field of sports psychology.) Or, you can informally educate yourself via reading books on the topic, watching educational seminars or playlists about sports psychology, or taking additional classwork.



TIP

The best combination of informal training is a comprehensive one, whereby you seek out classwork, read books on the topic in your spare time, and find yourself a mentor to supervise your own work as a sports psychology consultant.

Obviously, there will be far fewer formal training opportunities available to you than there will be informal ones, but both can prepare you to work in the field of sports psychology. Your clients, remember, are your best teachers, and if you aren't prepared to do good work in the field of sports psychology, they will let you know (either verbally or by never showing up again!). The key is that you make sure you have both the competency (clinically and performance-wise) to work with athlete and sports populations and the confidence in yourself to do good work (be professional, engaging, and fun to work with).



We highly recommend that students and psychologists wanting more experience working with athletes and teams seek out a local high school team and offer their services *pro bono* (free of charge). Doing this, while being supervised by someone who is a sports psychologist, can help build skills in the field. You can also serve as a valuable resource to your local high school!

The path to becoming a sports psychology or performance consultant

Not interested in going through all the schooling and classwork required to become a sports psychologist? Maybe a career in doing sports psychology consulting is the path for you. To become a sports psychology or performance consultant (these terms are frequently used interchangeably), you simply need to make sure you obtain formal or informal education in principles related to the psychology of performance improvement (such as behavior psychology techniques, for example) and sport participation (such as building team cohesion, leadership, and motivation, for example).

Since you won't be pursuing the more formal degrees and credentials that are well-known to the public, you want to make sure you are on top of your game in terms of being competent and well-versed in both psychological and performance terminology and principles. There are many ways to develop competency in both:

- » Read popular book titles and scholarly research
- » Watch YouTube and subscribe to professionals in the field
- » Follow professionals already working in the field on Instagram and Twitter
- » Take a la carte classes on psychology topics and performance improvement via online offerings or classes at a local college
- » Seek out informal internships with professionals already working in the field and gain supervised experiences
- » Attend seminars developed and presented by sports psychologists or experienced sports psychology consultants in private practice

The best course for developing competency as a sports psychology or performance consultant? All of the above! Sometimes, individuals are star-struck by the opportunity to work with athletes and coaches and rush to be in the field without developing the best training or education. Be aware of your human desire to be the center of attention or have your ego stroked by being associated with these athletes. Make sure you have the substance, and not just the fluff.



There is also a mid-level degree called a *terminal master's degree*, wherein you receive a master's degree and then receive supervision, after which you can open your own private practice and see individual clients. This is also an option for those seeking to work clinically with athletes. One such typical degree is an LPCC (Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor) degree. If you don't want to spend five years getting your doctorate, this can be an enticing (and less expensive) option and degree to pursue. Such a person can be well prepared to see athletes for performance-based and mental health areas.

Determining the Right Career to Pursue

Once you have determined that sports psychology is the right career for you, you need to decide between the formal track and the informal track. Of course you can also combine the two (informal and formal). With each path, there are benefits and drawbacks. Let's explore some of the pros and cons of each path, so that you will be better able to decide for yourself which path is best for you and your life situation.

The clinical/counseling path: pros and cons

Pros:

- » Reputation (formal training is typically recognized as a sign of competency by the public)
- » Depth of training (you typically take classes in behavioral psychology, cognitive-behavioral psychology, psychoanalytic psychology, statistics, aging and lifespan development, diagnosis and treatment, and so on)
- » Training opportunities connected with the school (many schools have relationships with internship and fellowship sites across the country)
- » Access to multiple professionals (you are taught by a variety of other PhD or PsyD professionals, with different styles, experience levels, and senses of humor!)
- » Networking (access to classmates in the field and professors already working in the field)

Cons:

- » Accessibility (many PhD and PsyD programs only accept a handful of students each year out of hundreds and hundreds of applicants)
- » Cost (it can easily cost upwards of 100,000 USD in loans to complete graduate program training). Note that there are many funding opportunities, especially with PhD programs, where graduate students teach or do research in exchange for tuition and a small monthly stipend.

The mental skills or performance consultant path: pros and cons

Pros:

- » Ability to choose and tailor your education to your own needs and time constraints/schedule
- » Ability to choose your mentors on an individual basis (no need to have to work with a professor or sports psychologist you may not get along with, for example)
- » Lack of time constraints on training (when compared to a doctoral program, for example, where you need to continue to move along the coursework path at a regular pace)

Cons:

- » Lack of a roadmap for your own training (there is no one way to get trained)
- » Effort required to seek out mentoring and supervision
- » Lack of formal credentials can result in perceived lack of expertise by public
- » Difficulties breaking into the field (when having to compete for jobs with PhD and PsyD holders, for example)

As with any profession, there are pros and cons to any degree and any training you receive. Don't get discouraged and choose a path that works for you — on your timetable, at your pace, and at whatever level of education you are comfortable pursuing. Not everybody wants to be the Director of Psychological Services in an athletic and sports medicine department (that was Leif's title for many years, as example).

Some people want to add expertise to an already existing private practice (which allows you to build another stream of income to your existing private practice). Others might want to work with one or two teams every year. You may even just want to work with your local high school team, and nothing more. All of these choices are great ones if they make you happy!



TIP

For more specific information, you can seek out Division 47 in the Society for Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology or the AASP (Associate for Applied Sport Psychology).

If you want to broaden your opportunities, seeking a counseling degree can help. This way, you can see individuals and groups for both performance-related matters as well as mental health issues. Recall that there are specific mental health issues that tend to plague athletes, including anxiety, depression, and eating disorders.

Investigating opportunities for internships

If you want to find internships in the field of sports psychology, keep in mind that there are formal opportunities (like jobs, you have to apply for them and interview prior to being offered a position) and informal opportunities (a local psychologist's private practice, for example). Both can provide you with the training you require to become both competent and confident as a professional in the sports psychology field.

If you are looking for formal opportunities, you can ask colleagues about positions open, participate in email or Facebook groups that offer opportunities, check out internship sites at college counseling centers, find post-doctoral fellowships connected with sports medicine centers or university counseling centers, and so on. To find an informal opportunity, you have to work a bit harder and ask around, and you'll most likely have to create your own experience, under supervision, of course, in the sports psychology field.

Job and Career Options in Sports Psychology

As discussed earlier, there are myriad opportunities to work in the field of sports psychology. For example, you could work in the following capacities:

- » Director of psychology at a sports medicine or university counseling services center

- » Sports psychologist at a university counseling center
- » Sports psychologist in a group private practice (with others)
- » Sports psychologist in an individual private practice (we have our own private practices, for example)
- » Sports psychology consultant
- » Performance consultant

There are undoubtedly many more formal and informal positions available than we included here, and they are increasing, which is a wonderful thing for those of us in the field!

Understanding Whether You Are Ready for a Career in Sports Psychology

Are you ready and prepared for job in the field of sports psychology? At first glance, you might eagerly respond “yes!” However, there are many variables that you need to look at when evaluating whether this is a career path you might want to undertake. For example:

- » **Risk tolerance.** Do you want to work for yourself, as you would in a private practice or as a solo consultant, or do you want to work in a group, as you would with a group private practice or as part of a counseling center or sports medicine center staff? There is more risk in working alone, since you alone are responsible for getting clients, charging and collecting fees, marketing, bookkeeping, and paying for office space, health insurance, and travel costs.
- » **Time frame.** Are you willing to spend many years training? In a counseling or clinical psychology program, you could easily spend 5-6 years (as a graduate student) doing so. You could also spend a greater amount of time if you are informally educating yourself.
- » **Sports enjoyment.** Do you enjoy all sports? The more sports you enjoy watching or participating in, the bigger your potential field of expertise and the more broad your potential client base is. Some professionals only enjoy working with certain sports (golf, or tennis, for example) and prefer not to work with other sports, and that is perfectly fine, too.

- » **Travel.** Some positions (such as working with university or professional teams) might require travel, which can take up chunks or all of your weekends.
- » **Patience.** Carving out a paying clientele niche in the field of sports psychology can be a slow and tedious process. You need to have success with clients, and then they will refer other clients to you. The more successful you are, the more you can charge for your services.

IF YOU WANT TO WORK WITH A SPORTS PSYCHOLOGIST

Although this book offers many of the strategies and techniques that we provide to our clients as sports psychologists, no book can take the place of working one-on-one with a professional. If you find that you'd like to work directly with a sports psychologist to take some of these strategies farther, look for

- **Someone who has both sports psychology training and clinical psychology training:** Sports psychologists with training in both counseling techniques and sports psychology principles are able to understand the person and the athlete.
- **A licensed psychologist:** If you have any questions about whether the person you're considering working with is licensed, you can contact your state's board of psychology. (Just search the Internet for your state and the term *board of psychology* to get that contact information.)
- **Someone who has extensive experience working with athletes and coaches, especially at your current level of competition:** Many people use exaggerated language on their websites and in their literature to make it seem as though they have more experience than they really do.

A good resource for more information on choosing a sports psychologist and sports psychology in general is the Society for Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology Division 47 (www.apa47.org).

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The Sports Psychology- Savvy Coach

IN THIS PART . . .

Learn new mental skills training and drills to use with your athletes

Understand the importance of drills you can utilize for improved mental performance

- » Getting your athletes to focus
- » Improving your athletes' ability to manage pressure
- » Motivating your athletes to succeed
- » Helping your athletes work together as a team

Chapter **18**

Coaching Today's Athletes

As a coach, you probably haven't given much thought to how often you use principles of sports psychology in your own life. You probably wish, though, that you had better resources available to teach those skills to your athletes. Applying sports psychology principles to your coaching can be one of the most critical factors of your athletes' success.

Coaches and players alike are learning that winning depends on a lot more than just talent and hard work. Coaches at all levels know that the mental game has more to do with success than any amount of technique. How many times have you seen players who possess incredible talent but lack motivation? How about athletes who work hard and are extremely focused, but can't seem to execute when the pressure is on? What about those incredibly gifted athletes who lack confidence in their abilities?

By focusing on the mental as well as the physical, you can make a big difference in the success of your athletes. If you want to be consistently on top of your sport, you can't afford *not* to mentally train your athletes. Not only do these skills improve your odds of being a successful coach, but they make the journey much more effective and enjoyable — for you and for your athletes.

In this chapter, we focus on four key areas of the mental game that every coach needs to address: focus, pressure, motivation, and teamwork.

Improving Your Athletes' Focus

Your athletes' level of focus the week before competition will typically be their level of focus on game day. If you want your athletes to maximize their focus in competition, they have to be practicing with consistent focus. If your athletes are engaged in highly focused practice sessions, the quality of their training is better, and, as a result, their execution on game day will improve. This improved execution will result in more success and more wins. It is not enough to simply practice mental skills only when they are with you at practice on the field or court. You can provide your athletes with additional ways to train off the field that can help improve their mental skills. Doing so does not require much extra effort and the benefits are substantial.



REMEMBER

The *quantity* of time your athletes spend practicing is not nearly as important as the quality. Focused execution in practice means focused execution in competition. If your athletes practice with 80 percent focus, they'll compete with 80 percent focus.

You can use a variety of simple techniques to improve your athletes' focus, as well as your own. We start this section with some techniques for getting your athletes ready for practice. Then we offer tips for helping your athletes stay focused throughout practice. Finally, we explain how to evaluate your athletes' focus over time.

Preparing athletes for practice

You may have noticed that athletes often come to practice with things on their minds other than their sport. They may have school concerns, financial worries, homework, or personal stress on their minds. So, you need to develop ways for your athletes to become focused *before* practice begins. A more focused mind leads to better practices, and a byproduct of better practice is confidence.

Think of this preparation as part of the actual practice. Taking time to prepare your team is critical. We encourage coaches to prioritize preparation when training their athletes. You have limited time with your athletes, so maximizing your time together is crucial.



TIP

Here are some easy ways to prepare your team for practice:

- » **Blow a whistle or horn to let your players know that they have five minutes before practice officially begins.** This signal indicates that they need to begin preparing mentally for practice and that they need to wrap up social conversations and/or meetings with trainers. Blow the whistle or horn five minutes later to let them know that the practice is beginning.



» **Have athletes complete a journal entry at the start of practice.** Give your athletes five minutes at the beginning of practice to write in their journals about what they want and need to accomplish in practice that day. Journaling helps them focus on what they're there to do. In the journal entry, they should address the following questions:

- What are my primary objectives for this practice? In other words, at the end of practice, what do I want to be able to say I accomplished today?
- How am I going to accomplish these objectives?
- What mindset do I bring to practice?

Give them at least five minutes to complete their journal entry. It doesn't matter how *much* they write — it's more about clarity and quality.

» **Have your athletes discuss their objectives with a teammate.** When your athletes verbalize their personal goals, their focus improves. Verbalizing creates clarity and accountability.

» **Tell them your specific expectations and purpose for each practice.** By letting your athletes know what they'll be doing and why, you help them focus on the tasks for that day. You're helping them concentrate on the practice objectives — and you're practicing being clear and deliberate about your goals.

» **As your players are warming up and stretching, require silence.** They should use this time to think about their practice goals or visualize themselves achieving their goals.

» **Develop routines.** Routines increase focus. Most athletes have routines before competition, but having routines before practice is just as important.

Remember: How you practice is how you perform.

» **Ask athletes to identify the things they control.** Take time at least once a month for athletes to discuss or make a list of the things over which they have control. Athletes need to understand and begin to develop the mental habit of focusing only on what they have control over — such as how much they practice, their attitude, their lifestyle choices, and how they prepare. They don't have any control over coaching decisions, teammates, opponents, referees, what other people say, and so on. When they focus on the things they can't control, they're wasting energy and their performance will decrease. Make sure you continually remind your athletes to control the controllable in their lives.

» **Focus on process versus outcomes.** Make sure your athletes are focused on the processes that make them better, rather than just on winning and losing. You can do this by emphasizing the importance of getting better each day (continual improvement) and de-emphasizing the outcomes of future games and events. There is a time and place to discuss outcomes, but day-to-day practice should always focus on the process of getting better.



ANECDOTE

Todd was working with a DI college golf team and noticed that the team was consistently slow to begin practice. He also noticed that they consistently started slow in tournaments. After Todd talked with the coaches and players, the coaches began setting aside the first 15 minutes of practice for the players to get mentally prepared and focused. Some players wrote in their journals; others spent time visualizing. At first, the coaches were somewhat hesitant to give up this time, but they also knew that their approach wasn't working so they gave it a shot. At the end of the year, the team made it to nationals, something they hadn't done in over five years. The coaches and players said that this focused 15 minutes at the beginning of practice was a critical part of their success.

Keeping athletes focused

Preparing your athletes to practice (see the preceding section) is one part of the equation. But you also need to help them maintain their focus throughout the practice.



TIP

Here are some ways you can help your athletes stay focused for longer periods of time:

- » **Stop in the middle of practice and address your team's focus.** This pause will bring your athletes' attention to how focused they are at that moment. It only takes five to ten seconds to do this. If practice lasts an hour and a half or two hours, stop at least two or three times and remind them to focus on the task before them. If you don't, you'll notice a decrease in focus over the course of practice.
- » **Remind your team of the goals for the day.** Throughout practice, remind your athletes what you're trying to accomplish in that session. The attention span of most people is short, so this practice is critical to success.
- » **Create and develop shorter skill drills.** The human attention span is short, so you want drills that are sharp, clear, and to the point. If you keep practice interesting, your athletes can better focus for extended periods of time.
- » **Make practice interesting (for them and for you!).** Sometimes practice will be routine and humdrum, but it doesn't have to be that way all the time. Inject competitive, pressure-filled situations and games to break up the monotony and keep athletes' minds sharp and alert. For example, instead of just practicing free throws, assign a percentage they have to reach in order to win. Vary the order in which you have them practice certain drills, as well as the intensity at which they complete them. You can also use drills and activities that are not even part of your sport — remember, it is important to think outside of the box!



REMEMBER

As a coach, you may think that your athletes should be focused all the time. But focus isn't an all-or-nothing phenomenon. Instead, there are several zones of focus (see Chapter 6). Not only is maintaining the highest level of focus for hours on end impossible, but even if athletes *could* do it, their energy would be drained. The key is for your athletes to be as focused as they need to be for the situation.

Evaluating and tracking your athletes' focus

You track and evaluate numerous facets of your athletes' performance, and focus is no different. Tracking focus improves concentration and fosters discipline. Here are some methods for tracking focus:

- » **Begin practice with journaling.** Before practice, have your athletes write and think about the importance of focus for the practice ahead. Have them rate their focus on a simple scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being most focused. If they rate themselves before practice, they're more aware of what they need to do to improve. They should end practice by doing the same. Over time, they'll begin to see trends emerge, and they'll feel a sense of accomplishment as their focus improves.
- » **Build focus into your practice discussions.** As you begin and end practice, have an open discussion about levels of focus that day. You can have the team quantify their focus with a number.
- » **Create a focus board.** This can be a simple whiteboard on which the team rates their level of focus in practice that week. The focus board should be displayed so the athletes can see it and make it part of a weekly routine, such as in the locker room. This technique is great for bringing focus to the forefront of their attention.



ANECDOTE

Todd creates a “game within the game” for his athletes. One of the easier ways to do this is with golfers. Many of his golfers are in their heads, overthinking their swing, worried about the score, comparing themselves to others. Todd makes them play, for example, a mental game where golfers track their “focus point” after each hole. Golfers give themselves a point for each shot on that hole that they feel focused. Thus, if they had four shots on a hole and were focused during three of those shots, they would put a score of three on that hole. The idea is that they try to maximize their focus points. This is extremely helpful because it places the attention on something in their control, something that does not create anxiety, and something that helps them play better. You can also use “commitment to the shot points,” “relaxed points,” or “effort points.” Think about how you can create this game for your team.

Teaching Your Athletes to Perform under Pressure

The ability to perform under pressure is one of the most critical aspects of athletic participation. In fact, it's the most common issue that brings athletes to see sports psychologists. As a coach, you've probably been frustrated and disappointed when your athletes — individually or as a team — failed to perform up to their capabilities. You've seen them execute and perform well in practice, only to watch them fail to deliver in competition. This is the damage that pressure can do. The athletes also are extremely disappointed or upset with themselves and feel tremendous pain at having let themselves, their coaches, and their teammates down.

As a coach, you have the ability and the responsibility to help your athletes practice under pressure so that they can perform under pressure. Being able to execute in practice (without pressure and consequences) is much different than doing so when the game is on the line or when performance really matters.

In this section, we fill you in on some simple yet extremely effective ways to run your practices so that your athletes get better at performing under pressure. If your athletes don't practice under pressure, they won't compete well under pressure. Your goal should be to design your practices with as much pressure and competition as possible.

Simulating competition

One of the best ways to prepare your athletes to perform under pressure is to simulate competition in practice — the more, the better. Finding ways to insert competition, even in small ways, reaps tremendous long-term benefits to your team down the road.

If your team has an important tournament coming up, hold a practice game the week before the competition, but be sure to control as many variables as possible, keeping them as similar to game day as you can. These variables can include:

- » **Time of day:** If your game is in the evening, schedule an evening practice game.
- » **Length of competition:** Make sure your practice game is exactly the same length as the real one.
- » **Quality of opposition:** You can bring in former players to provide better, newer challenges to your team.
- » **Weather conditions:** If the game will be outside, practice outside. If the game will be in the heat, practice in the heat.

Using imagery before, during, and after practice

Another way to help your athletes perform better under pressure is to teach them to use imagery (see Chapter 7). There are many uses for imagery, but its main purpose is for athletes to put themselves in the field of competition long before the game itself occurs. They create upcoming competitive situations in their minds so that when they step into actual games, they've already been there (in their minds). The more they see and feel themselves competing successfully when it counts, the better their ability to perform when competition actually arrives.

Ultimately, this is what mental training is about — training the subconscious so athletes can feel poised and calm in pressure-filled situations.



REMEMBER

In times of stress in sports, your athletes will naturally revert to their past experiences in pressure situations. Thus, if you train your athletes to be poised and present in stressful situations and expose them to extreme pressure (on occasion) at practice, once game time comes, your athletes will naturally be better prepared to do battle, no matter what comes their way.



TIP

Here are some ways you can work on this skill with your team:

- » **Journal before practice.** Have your athletes write about their performance in the upcoming practice. This gives them the opportunity to see themselves succeeding and to prepare their minds before going into practice.
- » **End practice with imagery.** At the end of every practice, take your athletes through a short imagery about the upcoming competition. Have them see the competition in their minds, and imagine themselves competing with great skill and composure.
- » **Teach athletes to use imagery during breaks in competition.** They can see themselves executing perfectly in a high-pressure drill or when a competitive situation is set up in practice. They can use imagery on a water break or when they aren't directly involved in a drill and they're just observing.
- » **Have your team discuss how they need and want to perform in the upcoming competition.** Having them verbalize how they want to compete forces them to think about and visualize what they want to happen. This way, they'll be less affected later, in competition.
- » **Go to the competition site ahead of time.** If possible, take your team to the competition site in advance. Visiting the venue can reduce nerves and help athletes imagine their upcoming performance more vividly. If you can't go to the actual site, get a picture of it online or have someone who's been there describe it (how big it is, what the surrounding area looks like, and so on).

There is a scene in the TV show “Ted Lasso” where Coach Lasso has his players walk out onto the world-famous Wembley Stadium in the UK to help them realize that they can perform just as well even though they will be playing in the second-largest stadium in Europe. Soccer is soccer. Although the scene is comedic, it demonstrates the point that players can imagine what they are going to do and what they have control over many times before they step out onto the field.

- » **Have your athletes write an imaginary newspaper article.** Create a headline that will appear in the local or national magazine the day *after* competition. For example, the headline might read, “Amherst Cardinals Begin Season with Huge Victory!” Then have your athletes write their own article. This exercise helps them focus on what’s going to happen, so that when they compete, they feel that they’ve already been there. In turn, pressure becomes less of an issue.
- » **Create pressure and competitive drills throughout practice.** Managing pressure — whether in a game situation or a drill in practice — is the same. Think of ways to have your players compete against one another in practice — even in tiny, simple drills — to create more opportunities for your players to learn to manage pressure situations.



ANECDOTE

A high school soccer team was preparing to play in the state semifinal tournament game. They had never reached the final four of the tournament. The coach asked Todd to speak with the team about performing in unfamiliar situations. He had them write an imaginary newspaper article with the following headline: “Team Reaches State Final for the First Time in School’s History!” The date on the newspaper he had created for the players was the day *after* the actual game. At first, the players thought it was silly, but as they discussed it with each other, they became more confident and calm. They went on to win the game. Later, they repeated this exercise and went on to win the first boys’ soccer state title in the school’s history.

Creating pressure-packed drills

Try to create drills in practice that put pressure on your athletes. The drills don’t necessarily have to be game situations — they can be tasks and experiences with competition and consequences. Keep in mind that you’re trying to provide opportunities for your athletes to be exposed to pressure prior to stepping out on the field of competition.



TIP

Tap into your creativity to think of ways that you can add pressure to everyday practice. For example, if you're a soccer coach, you may create five-on-five drills with goals where the losers have to run or clean up the locker room. If you're a basketball coach, you may force players to make a certain number of free throws and, if they don't, practice continues. If you're a tennis or golf coach, you may provide the "magic ball" — you give your players one ball to make the shot, and they earn a reward of some sort if they succeed or a penalty if they don't.

SPORTS: NOT A LIFE-AND-DEATH SITUATION

One of the ways to help your athletes manage pressure is to keep sports in perspective and to educate them about the true meaning of fear. Although athletes may feel pressure and fear when it comes to performing well in practice, trying to make the starting lineup, or having to make that final shot when the game is on the line, this isn't nearly the highest level of pressure a person can face. These moments may *seem* like life-or-death situations, and they may think that their lives will be ruined if they don't get the starting position, get a college offer, or win the national title, but that isn't the case.

Most athletes' sense of urgency, fear, and panic is disproportionate to reality. Athletics are important, and sometimes they can seem like the most important thing in the world, but the reality is that life will go on and the sun will come up tomorrow regardless of any sporting event or performance. Todd learned this lesson up close and personal and has shared this perspective with athletes and coaches throughout the world.

Todd was chosen as part of a team of people to consult to the Green Berets, the highest level of the Army. The Green Berets are involved in some of the most dangerous missions in the world, where the result can be life or death. Although Todd was there to help the Army understand the reasons for a high drop-out rate that they were experiencing in a certain military program, he learned more about what real fear and pressure is. During his days down at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Todd interviewed and talked with numerous brave and highly decorated Green Berets. He heard their stories — stories about coming face to face with death in some of the most war-ridden and dangerous places in the world. These men saw some of their fellow soldiers get killed, and they still had to survive and fight on.

This is real fear. This is real pressure. Their lives were actually on the line. That just isn't the case in sports. As a coach, you need to make sure that you keep sports in perspective and help your athletes do the same. Sure, sports are important and highly stressful. We've made it our mission to help athletes manage this stress and pressure. At the same time, you can help your athletes manage the pressure of sports better when they keep sports in perspective. Sports aren't life and death — the next time your athletes are having difficulty handling pressure, remind them of that.

Motivating Your Athletes

Motivation is the topic of many conversations among coaches. You hear things like “Alex has all the potential in the world — if only he were motivated to achieve” or “If the entire team had the motivation Sheryl has, we’d win the championship.” Although motivation ultimately begins within each individual, you can do things as a coach to improve and enhance motivation.

Numerous factors affect levels of motivation, including the following:

- » Family environment and upbringing
- » Previous athletic experiences
- » Physical health
- » Personal history and life experiences
- » Individual goals
- » Social experiences or issues
- » Personality factors

This list isn’t meant to be all-inclusive — other issues can affect motivation. As a coach, your goal is to understand how to best help your athletes to motivate *themselves* for competition.



Intrinsic motivation is when an athlete is inspired to practice for the sheer love of the sport and getting better. They may be able to practice for hours and hours without getting bored or tired. *Extrinsic motivation* comes from the outside world, in the form of incentives like trophies, money, awards, or praise. Intrinsic motivation is more important for long-term athletic success, while extrinsic motivation works on a short-term basis. Both are effective forms of motivations to use with your athletes. You just have to know when to use each to maximum benefit.

In the following sections, we offer some strategies for enhancing motivation.



There are no quick fixes for motivation. Improving motivation is a complex process — your job is to try different ways to motivate your athletes, as well as offer ways they can learn to inspire themselves.

RECOGNIZING SIGNS THAT MOTIVATION IS LAGGING

Motivation seldom remains constant. You probably remember this from your days as an athlete. It rises and falls throughout a season and through any athlete's career, regardless of age or skill level.

Here are some common symptoms to look out for:

- Showing up late for practice
- Decreasing effort in practice and games
- Increased mental errors and penalties
- Changes in attitude toward team activities
- Decreased performance and hustle

Directly discuss with your athletes any decreases in motivation that you notice. If you see a drop in motivation, address it from a position of concern and observation. Share your perceptions of their behaviors (for example, "I've noticed that you've been late to practice three times the past two weeks . . .") and see if you can assist them in any way. Your concern for your athletes' well-being may be the thing that raises their motivation.

Showing athletes the big picture

As a coach, your job is often to help your athletes maintain proper perspective. You can do so in different ways:

- » **Explain that what they're doing today is directly connected to the success they'll achieve during the season.** When athletes see this connection, their motivation levels rise because they feel like they're doing something worthwhile — not just what the coach wants. Let them know the goal of the drills you run. They may not always agree, but they'll be more motivated if they can see the connection between today's practice and the bigger picture — being successful and winning.
- » **Focus on life skills.** Sports are a terrific metaphor for life. They teach people how to work hard for goals and how to fight through adversity. Sports also teach lessons on dealing with the inherent unfairness of life, and how to work together with others for a bigger cause. Your athletes need to appreciate the fact that sports teaches these life lessons, because most of them will be doing something other than playing sports when they enter the professional world.

During and after practice, remind your athletes that what you're doing applies not just to sports, but also to life. Ask them how they can use what they learned in practice in their schoolwork, their relationships, or their eventual careers. This way, even though they may not see the direct connection, they can find motivation in the fact that it's going to help them in life.

By providing this perspective, you take pressure off the athletes because they see the bigger picture. They realize that the focus isn't just on just winning.

» **Identify why their motivation is lagging.** Motivation problems are often caused by issues unrelated to athletics. That is why we always make sure our athletes are keeping their lives together, both on and off the field.

Some reasons for drops in athletic motivation are changes in their position or role on the team, conflicts with you or other members of the team, going through a tough period of performance, and many others. Your job is to sit and talk with these players to understand what is happening and to provide them with insight and guidance. It is important to be accepting. Be curious about their issue, not judgmental. At times, your athletes may not like what you have to say, but at least they know what is happening and can make changes. And remember, it is much more difficult for an athlete to come to their coach than it is for you to go to them.



REMEMBER

Your goal is to teach your athletes perspective — not just when they're going through adversity. They need to know how to win with class and to understand that today's wins don't guarantee tomorrow's wins. They also need to understand that, although sports are an important part of life, they aren't the single most important part of it. There is life outside of sports. Part of your job as a coach is to help your athletes recognize that fact.



TIP

The key to proper life balance is perspective. If you can teach your athletes to keep proper perspective in the heat of battle or during a long, difficult season, you'll find that your athletes become better, more balanced athletes.

Designing fast-moving practices

One of the most effective strategies for increasing motivation is to design focused and fast-paced practices that require a lot of mental and physical energy. This strategy keeps your athletes from getting bored and helps them stay motivated to improve.



MASTERY VERSUS EGO

As a coach, a key part of your job is motivating your athletes. One of the best ways to motivate is through positive reinforcement — rewarding and praising effective and positive behaviors. For example, compliment an athlete when they show a great work ethic in practice or mental toughness after having a rough game. As humans, our brains have been wired to focus on the negative aspects of life. In addition, our culture teaches us to compare ourselves to everyone around us. We need to be intentional about focusing on positive behaviors rather than on negative behaviors and mistakes. Part of your job as a coach is to train your athletes to overcome this programming.

Before practice, remind yourself to notice the positive and point it out more than the negative when working with your team. Athletes know more than anyone when they make mistakes and are many times more critical toward themselves than anyone else. So, instead of pointing out mistakes, simply ask your athletes, “What did you learn from this experience or situation?” This is what you want anyway and it focuses more on the lesson than the mistake.

There are two ways to motivate your athletes, and they have a different result when it comes to motivation:

- **Mastery-oriented motivation:** Rewarding and reinforcing the process rather than the outcome. For example, when you praise an athlete for giving their best effort, for accomplishing the task in front of them, or for mastering a skill or play that they have been struggling with, these are examples of mastery-oriented motivation. This type of reinforcement encourages motivation.
- **Ego-oriented motivation:** Rewarding and reinforcing athletes for winning and outperforming others and punishing them for unsuccessful performance. Ego-oriented motivation pays little or no attention to effort, process, or skill improvement. You're focusing on how your athletes compare to others and praising them only if they win. This type of reinforcement leads to a *decrease* in motivation. Why? Because there will always be someone better and your team won't always win. If you base your judgment of success only on these things, an athlete's motivation can't help but drop.

Great athlete success is about getting better, about mastering skills and situations, regardless of whether you win. If you focus on mastery, and not on ego, you'll see your athletes' motivation continue to grow.

Here are some ways you can pick up the pace of practices:



REMEMBER

» **Keep your own energy level high.** When you're running practices, you need to demonstrate your own motivation by being excited and displaying lots of energy. Your own personal energy goes a long way toward modeling intensity for your team. If you're yawning on the sidelines, what are the odds that your players will be motivated to push themselves on the field?

» **Focus on quality, not quantity.** You can raise motivation and focus among your athletes when you keep practices shorter, efficient, and effective. These types of practice help maintain motivation. Long ineffective practices — just for the sake of saying you were practicing — decrease motivation.

Most coaches believe longer is better when it comes to practice. Nothing could be further from the truth. Focus instead on designing high-quality, effective practices. You'll achieve far greater results without as much wasted time.

» **Keep each task short and focused.** Develop a well thought-out practice plan. Make sure each task is no more than 30 minutes in length. The ideal time increment is 10 to 20 minutes. Employing a variety of drills keeps the mental and physical energy high.

» **Cultivate variety.** Practice routines can easily get boring and monotonous. But you can increase motivation by creating a variety of ways to teach and get your points across. You'll need to do some brainstorming and planning, and have some creativity, but the work you put in will pay positive dividends.

Ask other coaches for ideas and share your own ideas with them. Coaches can be great resources for each other, no matter the sport or experience level.



TIP

Finding inspiration

Motivation is directly linked to inspiration. The more inspired you are, the higher your motivation. When teams and athletes play and compete with inspiration, they play with sustained motivation.

Think about teams who've gone through some source of despair, such as the death of a teammate. They find deep inspiration to compete to their highest levels. Their inspiration goes beyond just winning — it involves a meaningful sense of purpose.

Although major life events do inspire athletes, your team doesn't have to suffer a tragedy in order to be inspired. Your job as a coach is to help your athletes find their inspiration. Spend time at the beginning of the season discussing what inspiration is and what it means to your athletes. Ask them to write and journal about what inspires them to compete — it might be a person, an experience, inner

drive, or something else. You can do this before one practice early in the season, or before the first competition. Make sure they connect to this source of inspiration throughout the season by putting pictures or words to their inspiration. They can do this individually — taping pictures and quotes in their lockers, for example.



REMEMBER

Athletes need to access this source of inspiration, especially when things are hard, because it'll help them dig a little deeper to perform when they need it most.

Inspiration comes from the heart. Discuss with your athletes how inspiration is a “heart” experience, not a “head” experience. Explore with each individual and the entire team what inspires them to succeed.

BATTLING BURNOUT

A long-standing effect of lack of motivation is burnout. With the obsessive nature of sports today, athletes commonly play sports year-round and specialize in one sport very early in life. Because of this, coaches see burnout among athletes at younger ages, sometimes as young as 12. You can combat burnout in your athletes in a variety of ways, including the following:

- **Randomly schedule off-days throughout the season.** If this isn't possible due to training demands, decrease training times across the board.
- **Change the order in which you do things at practice.** This variety will help keep your athletes interested and on their toes.
- **Alter the training activities.** Occasionally, include well-known games, such as kick-ball or tag, to mix things up while remaining competitive.
- **Have athletes learn new positions.** Not only will this provide for variety, but athletes will have a newfound respect for their teammates.
- **Provide for some sort of off-season.** Most coaches these days only pay lip service to the idea of an off-season, scheduling “voluntary” workouts that are really mandatory. Don't be one of those coaches. Allow your players to take needed time away from the sport, so that they can return to it refreshed and ready to kick butt.
- **Have your team engage in activities that aren't related to their sport.** This could mean having a cookout, going bowling, doing community service projects together, and so on. Help build a “we” mentality among your athletes.
- **Use other drills and activities from other sports to improve motivation through uniqueness and variety.** Our brains love new challenges and ideas, so make sure you supply some of those for your athletes on a consistent basis.



TIP

Tune into inspiration throughout the season. Motivation ebbs and flows throughout a season. Make sure to address and remind your athletes (and yourself) about their sources of inspiration. This consistent reminder and focus on inspiration helps keep motivation high.

Getting Your Athletes to Play as a Team

As a coach, you've probably always wondered whether there's a secret formula for creating a team with great chemistry. If you've been coaching for a while, you've experienced teams that seemed to gel naturally, and other teams that seemed to be made up of completely opposite personalities, always fighting and bickering. You've had games where you knew that if the team just played *together*, they'd be successful. You've also had teams with less talent that overcame great odds because of the commitment and camaraderie they shared.

Teamwork and chemistry are two of those complex issues that sometimes leave coaches scratching their heads, wondering what went wrong.

The good news is that you can do things to improve teamwork and commitment. As you know, there is so much more to success than just talent, and teamwork is a key component. Players need to function as a team in order to reach the goals they've set.



REMEMBER

There is no truer statement in sport than that famous acronym of TEAM: Together Everyone Achieves More.

Discussing the common mission everyday

A basic definition of a *team* is a group of people brought together to achieve a common mission. You need to build and develop the mission of your team, as well as maintain focus on it throughout the season. Here are some ways to do that:

- » **Make sure that your team mission is just that: a *team* mission.** Everyone needs some role in developing that mission. When this happens, you automatically have greater buy-in because everyone was involved in its creation.
- » **Make the mission of your team clear, concise, and simple.** Understand that goals are different from a mission. Every team has the goal of working hard and getting better, but your mission is more about who you are and what you stand for in your sport.

- » **Make the mission visible to players throughout the season.** Often, mission statements are written down and then never referred to again. Weave your mission into your everyday sport experience. You can do this by posting the mission statement (or at least part of it) around the locker room and other places where your players congregate. Remind them of the mission as they're warming up for practice, as well as during and after practice. Put written reminders in their lockers, email or text the mission to them, or put it on the team website if you have one.
- » **Determine how you'll achieve and live by the mission.** Give clear details of how athletes should perform every day so that they have a good chance of accomplishing the mission by the end of the season. For example, they need to be on time and prepared for every practice, make good off-the-field decisions for the team, be disciplined with their mental training, give 100 percent in practice, and so on. Talk with your athletes about the core beliefs and attitudes that they have to live by in order to make the mission a reality.
- » **Tie the mission to performance and process goals.** Many times mission statements can be heady and sometimes feel like fluff, be ambiguous, and be hard to translate into action. Tie your mission statement to performance goals, such as having the lowest goals against average in the league, and then to process goals, such as what each player is going to do today or this week to get better.



REMEMBER

The greatest example of your mission statement is *you*. What you do, what you say, and how you say it goes a long way toward modeling the behaviors you're seeking from your players. Be sure to be a solid example of your team's mission statement. Your athletes are watching and noticing, whether you want them to or not!

Demonstrating how “we” is better than “me”

Although, as a coach, you may talk a lot about teamwork, you need to be active about emphasizing the importance of this concept to your team. Provide experiences and activities that help with team building and make teamwork and the “we” concept concrete for your athletes.



TIP

Here are several of the most popular and effective team-building exercises that we recommend in our work with hundreds of coaches across the United States:

- » **Team autograph:** In this exercise, you take a piece of equipment from your sport — such as a hockey stick, a soccer ball, a basketball, a baseball, or a bat — and have everyone on the team sign their name, but only after

committing themselves to the team mission for the season. Place this autographed item in a place where all players see it every day.

- » **Roped together:** Buy a rope that's long enough to have each team member take a hold of it. Have your team get in a circle. Give the rope to one person and ask them to state what they are committed to doing for the team's success. They pass the rope to another player — not the person next to them — and that person does the same. Each person in the circle catches and holds onto the rope, states their commitment, and then passes it on. When everyone has done this task, you'll see that the rope has formed a web. Make analogies that we're all connected, that someone is on either side of you for support, that one player's attitude can pull another person's attitude in another direction (positive or negative), and so on. Additionally, if one person lets go of the rope, everyone else on the team is affected. After the activity is finished, some teams like to cut the rope into smaller pieces, and then use the pieces as wristbands for the season.
- » **Video highlights:** When your team has performed well and you were able to have it videotaped, put together a highlight reel to show your athletes. This puts in their minds the importance of teamwork, shows them proof of its success, and allows them to see it in action.
- » **Balloon train:** In this exercise, each player blows up a balloon and ties it off. When each player has a balloon, split up the team into two or three groups. The object is for each team to place the balloons between them and carry them over a certain distance without dropping any of the balloons. The hard part is that players can't touch the balloons with any body part except their stomachs. In other words, they have to make a train, with the balloons keeping them connected, at the same time walking or running through a path set out by you. Make observations about leadership, teamwork, communication, and integrity as they proceed in this exercise.
- » **Movies:** Have your team watch a movie together. Some movies that have good sports psychology themes include *Rudy*, *Hoosiers*, *Any Given Sunday*, *Remember the Titans*, and so on. The goal is to find a movie that addresses teamwork in some way, whether it shows players working together or players and coaches discussing what teamwork means to them.



TIP

Don't just play the movie and expect your players to get the message. Instead, watch the movie, or certain scenes in the movie, and then discuss how the movie or those scenes apply to your team. Ask your players whether they have the kind of teamwork shown in the movie. Talk about how they can continue to build greater teamwork or what gets in the way of their teamwork. The movie should be a springboard to a conversation about teamwork.

» **Book or podcast of the week:** Have a group of the players be responsible for leading a discussion on some topic related to leadership and teamwork. Many coaches find a book that they use with the team each season and every week, a group of the players are responsible for leading a discussion around the concept of teamwork and how it looks and feels. The same goes for a short podcast — you or the players can choose one and bring it to the team as a topic of discussion for 10-15 minutes one time per week.

Teamwork, like all the other skills taught in this book, is something that needs to be practiced on a daily basis. It is not enough to do one of the activities and expect your team to be close.

Giving teamwork more than lip service

Teamwork can't be taught — it must be modeled. In the preceding section, we fill you in on some team-building activities. In this section, we offer ways you can make a difference in how well your players work together.



TIP

Here are some ways you can lead your athletes toward becoming a closer-knit, hardworking group:

» **Be consistent with your rule enforcement.** Make sure that your players know the rules ahead of time; distributing team-policy manuals is a good way to do that. When the rules are clear, have the players agree to follow them or sign off on them. Then be consistent with enforcement. One of the greatest ways to destroy team cohesion is to enforce rules inconsistently. No player or athlete on your team — star player or not — is above the law.

When developing rules for your team, keep in mind that the more rules you have, the more potential problems you're creating. Less is more. Develop rules that provide guidance on how you want your players to act ("We agree to display good sportsmanship during competition" or "We agree to be on time for all practices and competitions"), but don't make them exhaustive. The more rules you have, the greater the chance that your athletes will break the rules, and the more potential work and stress you're creating for yourself.

» **Address team conflicts or rule violations immediately.** The team needs to be focused on improving their skills as athletes and accomplishing their team goals, not on bickering and "he said, she said" discussions. Deal with violations of team rules immediately and move on.

» **Address and manage egos.** Athletes need to have healthy egos, but athletes who get too big for their britches can create dissension and distraction on your team. If you see any of your athletes acting in a way that seems selfish or counter to the team mission, address it quickly. You're better off developing a strong *team ego* — in which everyone has pride in the actions of the entire team — than you are in allowing a culture to develop on your team in which individual egos rule the roost.

O CAPTAIN! MY CAPTAIN!

Leadership by captains or co-captains can have a major impact on the success and enjoyment of a season. A team can be successful without strong leadership, but your odds are greatly improved when your team is led by strong captains.

The actions and words of captains influence the team's motivation. If captains have the respect of their teammates, those athletes will want to follow the captains' lead. On the other hand, when players don't respect the captains, motivation wanes in practice and, as a result, in competition.

More disciplined teams have greater leadership, both on and off the field. Captains who show up early to practice, stay after practice to work on individual technique, and balance healthy living outside of sports have a positive impact on team success.

In the same way, positive attitude and belief are enhanced by excellent player leadership. When captains have a bad attitude or don't believe in the team's potential, you see a ripple effect throughout the team.

When you have strong captains, you can spend more of your time actually coaching. When your captains are doing the right things on and off the field, there are fewer obstacles in your team's way.

Talk to your team about what qualities you're looking for in a captain: maturity, years of experience, past positions of leadership (for example, student council president), communication skills, the ability to lead by example, commitment and loyalty to the team, a willingness to hold other players accountable, respect for and from teammates and opponents, and a strong work ethic. Then allow the players to vote. If you've educated them well on what you're expecting from your captains, you shouldn't be surprised by the results — most teams will choose the same two or three people that you would've chosen.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Utilizing drills to improve your ability to manage pressure
- » Creating drills to bring your team together
- » Specializing in drills that improve communication and problem solving
- » Implementing drills for improving leadership

Chapter **19**

Mental Drills to Use with Athletes and Teams

You have learned by now that your mental muscle is something that needs to be trained. You need to practice these skills if you want them to work for you and your athletes. This chapter provides drills that you can use with your athletes and teams. Remember, just as you take your athletes and team through drills to improve their fitness, strength, and physical skills, you need to do the same to improve their mental fitness.



WARNING

Try not to skip on this and look at this as “extra,” or something you do only if you have time. As a coach, you no doubt realize that mental errors are the most frequent errors and they occur partly because athletes are not training their minds and partly because you are not prioritizing mental training in practice. Don’t expect your athletes to do mental training at home if you do not make it a priority during practice. If you make mental training part of your practices, your athletes are more likely to make it part of their individual mental training plans.

Drills for Dealing with Pressure

An important first step in helping your athletes and teams deal better with pressure is to read Chapter 10. This will help reorient you to the ideas about pressure that your athletes and teams experience. This is our most common area of focus as sports psychologists — how to better manage the stress, anxiety, and pressure associated with competitive sports. Check out *Leadership For Dummies*, by Marshall Loeb and Stephen Kindel (Wiley), to understand some simple concepts about leadership.

Selecting material about managing pressure

As part of a team or when working with your individual athletes, one simple way to start the dialogue is to bring materials to practice, such as a book like this one, short podcasts or YouTube videos of events in your particular sport, or anything dealing with the topic of pressure in sports. They need to be short. Give them out ahead of time and then follow up with a discussion. Talking about pressure is a powerful drill and can help your athletes and teams deal better with it.

Having your players take control of the topic

When you pick a reading or develop a discussion around this topic, have your athletes take the lead. Their involvement and ownership of the process is the key to success. For example, they may be responsible for leading the discussion of Chapter 10 from this book with the team. Then each athlete can discuss their personal experiences with pressure. When they take ownership and can teach some of these skills, they automatically improve. Being able to talk about their challenges with pressure will lead to great discussions among the team, because everyone is dealing with it. It also helps each player to hear others discussing their tips and tricks for dealing with pressure.

Creating pressure drills

At the end of every practice, design short skill drills that your athletes need to execute under pressure. The pressure usually takes the form of time (less available) or intensity, or having consequences attached (wind sprints for the losing side, picking up gear after practice, and so on). It could simply be that athletes compete against one another and only the winners advance to the next round. You can do this every practice or spread them out and have players advance the next

day. You can also reward players that perform well, which adds a fun element to a tense situation.



ANECDOTE

Todd works with a baseball player at a DI university where the team is always in the hunt for the national championship. Every single position-coach ends practice by having their players do pressure drills. There are consequences for the ones who lose and the ones who win. Pride and motivation can be two of the rewards. But the point is that the players get more experience and practice at managing pressure because they deal with it every day.

Todd also consults at a high-level golf training center. The director of golf noticed that even though the junior golfers were working on their swings and bodies all winter long and working on their mental game, they still were not performing well in the spring tournaments. Todd suggested that they add pressure drills, whereby the golfers competed with one another at the end of every practice. The golfers had the skills, but they also needed to learn how to manage the pressure of a tournament golf. Sometimes one player had to perform a skills with all of the other golfers watching.

Simulating game like-conditions

The more you can simulate game-like conditions, the better. This helps your athletes experience game-day pressure. The more familiar they become with these situations, the better they will learn to handle the pressure. Create a list of special situations that you can simulate in practice so that your players will perform better in these situations when game time comes.

Bringing imagery drills to practice

You should make imagery a regular part of your practices. Revisit Chapter 7. The idea here is that you create situations in your athletes' minds, whereby they experience pressure, but they also imagine themselves successfully staying calm and performing at their best.

Creating drills where the athletes do not need to think

Athletes experience pressure because of what is going on in their minds. Remember that pressure exists only in the mind. Coaches can create drills — easy ones that are not even related to their actual sport — to help them get the feel and experience of “being an athlete” and “not thinking” while performing.

For example, you can have golfers juggle golf balls — it gives them the experience of not thinking, for example. Or you can also use other sports drills, such as shooting free-throws in basketball or kicking a penalty kick in soccer — where the players just “do” and not think. Since pressure is created in the mind, this is a great way to experience playing without thinking.



REMEMBER

Every athlete and coach should be journaling multiple times a week. It does not need to be lengthy. Simply stated, athletes and coaches who journal improve self-awareness and get better, faster. Give your athletes a 10–15 minute period at the start or end of practice every week to journal about managing pressure and what it means to them. You can even pose a specific question and have them answer it. You get the idea: Get your athletes journaling, and often!

Drills for Bringing Teams Together

The techniques covered in this section can help bring your team together:

- » **Develop a team mission.** Developing a team mission statement can sometimes seem like fluff and not relevant to what you are doing day-in and day-out. Make your team mission as tangible and simple as possible. Make it real, one that your athletes can relate to, and one that focuses on behaviors that you want your team to exemplify. Have your athletes take charge and assist you in developing it — this helps build buy-in. Then place the mission statement where athletes can see it on a daily basis and make sure to tie back to it in your daily practices and games.
- » **Develop team goals.** Team goals are often discussed at the beginning of the season, never to be revisited. It is important to develop these goals early and make certain that they are meaningful to you and your athletes. Post them everywhere, so your athletes can see them often and stay connected to process goals on a weekly basis. This helps everyone to stay committed to their individual and collective process for getting better every week. By staying focused on the process of getting better, your athletes *will* get better and they will think about outcomes less. See Chapter 3 to learn about setting effective goals.
- » **Create visuals that display how goals are connected.** Make sure your athletes know how what they are doing today is connected to overall success. Athletes can get lost in the process of daily practice and preparation for competition, but the daily process can help them stay connected to goals and missions.
- » **Read materials and discuss them as a team.** Give the team chapters from books or podcasts and then take 10–15 minutes each week in practice to discuss the themes. Take time to assess how you are doing as a team, and/or to address blocks to team connection and cohesion.

- » **Address challenges to teamwork or important issues and obstacles facing the team.** There is a saying in the therapy world — we are as sick as our secrets. People suffer because they do not acknowledge reality, usually because it is a reality they don't like. Teams and relationships are challenging and the best thing we can do is put things out on the table in front of us, in order to better deal with them. This not only brings issues to light so that they can be solved, but the process also creates an emotional connection among team members. *Vulnerability is strength.*
- » **Develop drills in which athletes must work together to be successful.** There are many ways to find drills (on the Internet or ones that you create yourself) whereby players need to work together in order to be successful. A sports psychologist can provide drills to facilitate this process.
- » **Communicate.** Find new ways to communicate with your athletes and for your athletes to communicate with one another. Everyone needs to practice basic listening and communication skills. People toss these skills aside as being too “touchy feely,” but the simple fact is that proper communication builds emotional bonds, and therefore more commitment to the team and to each other. Have your team find as many ways as possible to communicate and connect.
- » **Discipline the team as a whole, whenever required.** When the team needs to be held accountable or individual players need to be held accountable, it can be powerful to enforce consequences on the entire team. Doing so builds accountability within the team and responsibility for the entire team to hold each other to high standards of behavior. Teams that discipline themselves connected and perform better than teams that don't.
- » **Allow your team and players to choose captains, practice schedules, and roles.** The more involvement and ownership players have in these decisions, the more commitment they show to each other. You need to decide as a coach the appropriate levels of responsibility (usually, the older your athletes are, the more responsibility they can be given to make these choices), but try to give as much as is realistic. Obviously, the maturity of the team and players factors into your decision.
- » **Encourage team activities in the off-season.** Arrange barbecue dinners, bowling nights, or any activity that the team can do as a whole, in the off-season, when there is no pressure and when people can relax and get to know each other in a different context.
- » **At least twice a month, discuss with your team the importance of “we.”** Talk about how you assess your athletes on this quality. This discussion reinforces the idea that success is a collective effort rather than a series of individual efforts.

Drills for Improving Communication

These techniques can help teams and athletes communicate better:

- » **Set aside time to communicate.** Many teams and athletes never set aside the time to communicate their thoughts and feelings. This process is critical to success! Many coaches and athletes believe that they do not have time for this because they need to practice their sport skills. The fact of the matter is that skills are hindered, anyway, when there are underlying psychological issues on the team. Make communication part of practice. One of the greatest mistakes coaches make is not making time for these types of skills. You're missing out on important skills if you don't make time for communication.
- » **Set up a chat board.** Although not as good as person-to-person communication, you can set up a chat board or Instagram account for the team and pose questions. It can be questions like, "What makes a great team?" or "What is one goal you have for tomorrow's practice?" These types of interaction improve communication. It is important to set guidelines and boundaries about respect and professionalism, of course, right from the start.
- » **Bring in a sports psychologist.** One of the skills of good sports psychologists is that they understand communication. They can come in and help improve communication in order to prevent problems from occurring and help teams reach their potential from the onset. Sports psychologists can help the team work through its problems.
- » **Provide reading materials or podcasts from great coaches and teams on communication.** Simply assign a podcast once per week from a great coach or speaker discussing the topic of communication. Then have the team discuss it. Just talking about communication improves communication!
- » **Make sure the team and athletes are communicating on the field.** Communication on the field (or ice or court or pitch) is critical to success. Make sure you emphasize and hold your athletes accountable for ongoing communication on the field of play. When they practice communication this way, it makes it easier to communicate about other, possibly more challenging topics, off the field.

Drills for Improving Problem-Solving

The techniques covered in this section help improve problem solving:

- » **Discuss the idea of athletic IQ.** Talk with your team about the importance of knowing strategy and understanding the playbook. When they understand concepts and plays better, they perform more confidently because they see the purpose behind what they are doing.
- » **Watch game film.** It is critical to watch game film. This action helps athletes see for themselves how they made or did not make effective decisions in real time. These are great teachable moments! It is important to create a safe environment and one of curiosity when doing this so that players are open to these learning opportunities. Take time to stop and discuss mistakes and successes — as a team — so that everyone can benefit.
- » **Watch practice film.** Most teams do not watch practice film, but there is a whole lot of learning that can take place when you do. When we see how we compete and execute in practice, we see the subtle differences between success and failure. For example, when we were in graduate school, we were videotaped frequently so we could more quickly and clearly see what we were doing well and what we needed to work on with our clients.
- » **Watch video of higher-level players.** Showing video of higher-level players performing well can help your athletes and teams learn much more about their sport and therefore make better decisions in the field of play. You can also show video of higher-level players doing the basic tasks of their sport (the boring ones that people may overlook but that are important to overall success, for example) to emphasize how important fundamentals are to success.
- » **Practice mental skills.** One of the things that gets in the way of good problem solving is stress. Athletes and teams feel stress just like everyone else. By training their mental muscles, your athletes and teams can learn good problem solving skills. Stress and anxiety can become major obstacles to performing well. Have your athletes practice mental skills such as relaxation training or controlled breathing so that they can manage their stress better and, ultimately, make better decisions during competition.

Drills for Leadership Development

The techniques covered in this section help improve leadership skills and abilities:

- » **Discuss leadership in practice.** As discussed in the other drills, it is important to simply bring the idea of leadership into practice. Ask the team questions or maybe text them a question or a famous quote ahead of time. You can also bring ideas and questions to the team through a chapter from a book or a podcast from a great leader. The key is to get the topic on the table, so to speak. When we discuss a topic, we hear and learn more perspectives on it. It does not need to be anything sophisticated or highly planned — just bring up a challenge or question to your athletes around the topic of leadership.
- » **Assign players to take leadership roles in practice and games, regardless of the title of captain.** This is always a great way to help leaders become better leaders and help teammates practice their own leadership skills. Provide opportunities for the players to lead — leading the warm up, leading a discussion on leadership or any of the mental topics in this book, planning the team's social events, or giving a pre-game speech. This may not always be easy for some of your players, but it is your duty as a coach to teach them these skills, not just for sports but for life after sports.
- » **Listen to podcasts or read sections of good books as a team.** Create a list of podcasts you use once per week during the season. There can be a set time each week whereby you listen to the leadership podcast. We encourage it to be part of practice — you are showing your athletes the importance of mental training. You can also have a Zoom chat at some point in the week outside of practice, or a group text discussion on the topic, whatever works for you and your team.
- » **Praise positive leadership.** As humans, we are very quick to point out the negative aspects of ourselves and others and much less likely to point out the positives. Make it a goal to praise one act of positive leadership by at least one player every single practice. Once this becomes a habit, your players will try to lead more effectively simply because they want to be noticed and praised, and they will begin to understand how important leadership is to team success.
- » **Meet with the leaders on the team and help them develop their leadership skills.** You can develop a leadership meeting or forum where a small group of your athletes get together weekly to discuss leadership on the team — their challenges, questions about how to better lead, or difficult situations. The best coaches in the world have these meetings with their players and the best leaders in companies do the same — why shouldn't you do this with your team?

- » **Establish a leader of the week award.** Provide an award or announcement each week for “Leader of the Week.” This praise will keep athletes’ motivation high. You can even have a plaque in the locker room with the leader’s name. It may sound small, but these types of things go a long way. Small things make big differences.
- » **Use the jersey number approach.** This is an exercise that Todd learned from one of his DI coaches. This coach met with each player once a month, on the day of the month that matched their jersey number. Thus, if a player’s number was 10, she would have lunch or meet with them on the 10th of every month. (If the number was above 31, the coach developed a simple way to make sure the players got to see her once a month.) This set time and space allowed the coach to get to know the players better and give them feedback on a multitude of topics. It also gave the players a chance to discuss matters important to them. As you know, player motivation goes through the roof when they feel cared about and listened to.
- » **Task your athletes with planning a practice.** Take the time to have your athletes (or leadership group of athletes) plan part of your practice. This enables your athletes to take ownership of the process. They also begin to get better at problem solving because, when a person can teach a skill in practice, they understand it better.

5

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IN THIS PART . . .

Develop new, powerful ways to become a better competitor

Learn the keys to better parent your athletes

Develop more tools to become a better leader on your team

- » Knowing why you're playing sports
- » Setting goals and making a plan for achieving them
- » Training your body and your mind

Chapter 20

Ten Ways to Be a Better Competitor

Are you ready to take your game to the next level? If so, read on. In this chapter, we fill you in on ten ways you can immediately improve your ability to compete, using the tools and techniques that we teach to top athletes from around the globe. Apply these tips in your own training, and you'll find that they pay immediate dividends.

Evaluate Where You Are

In order to figure where you need to go, you first have to know where you are. In this same way, if you want to become a better competitor, you have to evaluate where you find yourself in three key areas:

- » **Physical:** Consider the physical components for your sport — speed, strength, balance, posture, sleep, diet, flexibility, and so on — and get objective feedback from trainers, coaches, teammates, family, and other specialists.

- » **Skills:** Evaluate the most important skill sets for your sport and seek feedback from others who are experts in those areas. This also includes what we refer to as your “sport IQ.” This is simply meaning being on top of your gameplan, knowing as much about your opponents as you can, and watching game film to learn more about defensive and offensive schemas.
- » **Mental:** With or without a sports psychologist, evaluate yourself on important mental and emotional components in your sport. Assess your attitude, work rate, mental toughness, imagery ability, mental preparation, persistence, leadership, coachability, focus, ability to manage your emotions, confidence, ability to handle pressure, and so on.



REMEMBER

The more data you have, the better your chances for becoming a stronger competitor, so ask others to assess you as well. Talk to your coaches, teammates, and trusted friends and get their take on where you are. Once you have a measure of where you are at, you can better quantify your progress moving forward.

Know What Motivates You

You need to know what motivates you so that you can get through the challenging times. Why do you play your sport? Is it because you love the thrill of competition? Do you do it to be part of something larger, to be part of a team with friends and teammates, to be one of the best at something, or to prove the naysayers wrong? (Turn to Chapter 4 for more about motivation.)



REMEMBER

Motivation levels ebb and flow throughout the season. At the end of every season, evaluate your *intrinsic motivation* (the motivation to compete that comes from within). Although external rewards are nice, they aren't enough to get you through the hard work and pain it takes to be a top competitor. You have to have internal reasons (love of the game, for instance) to keep you going long-term and to reach your full potential.

Define Your Goals

Your goals should inspire and drive you to get better on a daily basis. Make your goals specific, and track and evaluate them consistently. Place written reminders of your goals in numerous places — in your locker, in your bedroom, on the bathroom mirror, wherever you'll see them often.

Often, athletes spend a lot of time developing their goals, only to forget them. They don't take the time to assess their progress toward these goals. Goals motivate you, keep you accountable, and ensure that you're on track to success. If you take the time to set goals, make the time to evaluate your progress consistently. Define them, remind yourself about them, and track them.



REMEMBER

Your goals must be realistic but challenging. Review your goals with coaches, parents, or mentors. Get feedback about your goals. Set up a plan to accomplish them. And, most important, dream big — don't let anyone deter you from accomplishing and going after something that's important to you. How do you know if they are good goals? If they get you out of the bed in the morning feeling motivated!

Set an Action Plan

Your dreams and goals are important, but without an effective plan, they'll remain dreams and goals rather than accomplishments. Part of the reason that many athletes don't accomplish their goals is because they don't have an effective plan. When you set a plan, you dramatically improve your chances of success.

For example, say your team wants to win a conference championship. This goal is important and motivating. But that championship is 6 to 12 months down the road and you need to have the road map on how to get there. What are you going to accomplish in six months, in two months, in one month, in one week, or today? This sort of plan (you'll need to adjust it along the way) provides your team with a clear path of action for reaching those goals.

Think of a ladder when it comes to setting goals and imagine short rungs of a ladder — these are tiny steps you take each day. It is easier to follow these tiny steps than to have a ladder that is so big that you cannot even physically reach the first rung. Keep the goals short and sweet — then you accomplish an inch every day and just think where you will be in 3 or 6 months!



REMEMBER

You need to set action plans in all the areas you evaluate yourself in (see “Evaluate Where You Are,” earlier in this chapter). When you know your current state in each area, set goals that are critical for success, and then set a written, detailed plan of action toward the achievement of those goals.

Keep a journal in which you track and evaluate your progress along the way. Stay connected to your action plan each and every week — it's the road map to accomplish your success. Think of your action plan as your mental GPS. It keeps you on the path to where you want to be.

Improve Gradually and Consistently

Success in sports can be a long time coming. Think about how good you are now compared to your skill level a few years ago. You've made tremendous progress, but there's always room to grow and improve. Success in any endeavor takes time and hard work. If you're looking for immediate gratification, sports may be challenging for you. Sure, things can go very well, but you may go months without seeing improvement or rewards for your effort.

Top athletes and coaches know this, and they still work every day to become their best. They take daily steps toward reaching their long-term goals. If you can simply work to get a little bit better today, and then a little bit better tomorrow, and so on, you'll notice dramatic improvements over time. Do the things now that will make you better in the future, and do them often!

Train Your Mind Daily

Daily mental training is one of the most ignored parts of becoming a better competitor. Why? Because most athletes and coaches don't know *how* to train their minds. They know how to improve their athletic skills and fitness levels, but they were never taught to train their mental "muscle."



REMEMBER

Your mental "muscle" is like every other muscle in your body — the more effectively you work it, the more effectively it works for you. If you want "toned" mental muscles, you've got to give them a daily workout.



TIP

Keeping a journal is one of the best ways to train your mental muscle every day. You take the time to evaluate, monitor, and improve your athletic skills and mental abilities. But don't just complete a journal entry for the sake of completing an entry. Make sure to spend time working on the mental area or areas most important for you right now. For example, if you need to improve your focus, then write in your journal about your focus before practice (making a commitment to be consciously aware during practice and improving it) and evaluate yourself afterward. Use the specific chapters in this book to address the area you feel is most important and make sure to practice at least one of the strategies for that skill on a daily basis.



REMEMBER

The mental training drills that you learn in this book and repeat on a daily basis prepare you to perform "without thinking." It seems funny, but we want you to train your mind to not think, because athletes perform their best when they are prepared, trust their training, and simply let their bodies do what they have trained them to do.

Improve Your Athletic Skills

You already know that improving your athletic skills is necessary to becoming a better competitor, no matter your current level of fitness and skill. That's why you practice and drill so often. Your mental abilities might be sharp, but they certainly don't replace the specific skills you need for your sport — your mental skills only complement your physical skills.

Training physically is where you spend the majority of your time, and rightly so — but make sure you are improving in the areas most important and necessary for your success. You need to know how to train your skills for your sport properly and that is why good coaching is a must. Get feedback from coaches and others and be honest with yourself about where your strengths and weaknesses lie.



TIP

Focus on your strengths, and make them your competitive weapons. Develop your weaker areas enough that they are a strong part of your arsenal, but put most of your attention and focus on improving your strengths. This is an easier, and more enjoyable, way to improve anything.



WARNING

Don't spend too much time trying to develop your weaknesses into strengths — it'll take too much effort when compared to building your existing strengths. Plus, your natural motivation will be higher when you're working on your strengths than it will be when you're working on improving your weaknesses. Having said that, it's okay to work on your weaknesses — the ones getting in the way of performance. You can identify these areas through working with your coaches or analytics and stats. Just make sure you maximize your strengths and get weaker areas to a place where they do not hurt performance.

Tweak Your Methods

If you want to be a better competitor, you need to be able to evaluate and adjust your methods as you go. As a competitor, you want to stay ahead of the pack, which requires you to seek out every opportunity to get better.

You can stay ahead of the pack by seeking out new mentors, new coaches, and a sports psychologist, as well as by learning new skills in your sport. Adjust your action plan every so often to accommodate obstacles and changes in your life that occur along the way.



The most successful athletes, coaches, and leaders are the ones who are always seeking to learn, grow, and improve. Be creative and open-minded along your path to success! Be curious, not critical!

Develop and Maintain Your Fitness

Your fitness level — your strength, speed, power, endurance, flexibility, and so on — is linked to your level of competitiveness in two ways:

- » **The more fit you are, the better you'll perform.** You need to start the season in top shape, not try to get in shape when the season is starting.
- » **The more fit you are, the more confident you'll be.** Confident athletes compete better and more fiercely! If you feel good about your body and know that you can physically outlast your opponent, you'll feel more confident. On the other hand, if you aren't sure you'll be able to perform your best, your confidence will take a hit.

If you want to be a better competitor and a more confident athlete, keep yourself in great shape. Remember, it is really difficult to be mentally tough when your fitness levels are not where they need to be. Your body and mind both need to be in tip-top shape. This not only comes from working with strength and conditioning coaches, but also by taking the best care of your body when it comes to diet and sleep.

Seek Out Pressure

A key aspect of being a better competitor is the art of performing when it counts. One of the main reasons that some of the top athletes in the country come to see us is because — even though they have amazing skills and can perform well in practice — they struggle to perform when it really counts. We help them develop mental skills and teach them ways to train their mental “muscle” in order to better handle pressure. Some of these strategies include journaling about how you want to perform under pressure, evaluating and tracking your progress, tracking how you feel when under pressure, practicing breathing and muscle relaxation strategies, and using mental imagery. (We cover these techniques throughout this book.)



REMEMBER

Many of the athletes we work agree that a large percentage of their sport is mental, and that a large percentage of the mistakes they make are mental ones. But then they go on to say that they spend minimal or no time training their mental muscles. If you want to be a better competitor, training your mental muscles has to become a consistent part of your preparation.



TIP

Actively seek out pressure whenever and wherever you can. Put yourself in a position in which you have to perform when something is on the line, where performance matters and has real consequences. If you practice under pressure, you'll perform under pressure. Compete against your most skilled teammates in simple drills, create more pressure with inter-squad and pre-season games, and have fun!

Professional golfers wager with each other on who can make the most putts. Soccer players see who can hit the crossbar from a certain distance. The more situations you can find to put pressure on yourself to perform, even in non-sports situations, the better you'll perform under pressure. Train yourself under harsh conditions, so that when you are in difficult positions during competition, you'll feel more relaxed and prepared.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Helping your kids get the most out of their athletic experiences
- » Comforting your kids when things don't go their way
- » Supporting without smothering, but holding your kids accountable
- » Setting a good example
- » Keeping the focus on learning life skills
- » Making sure you keep things in perspective

Chapter **21**

Ten Ways to Parent an Athlete

Parenting an athlete in today's fast-paced, results-oriented world of sports is one of the most difficult tasks you'll face as a parent. Today's young athletes are stronger, smarter, and more specialized than the young athletes of previous generations. They're also under more pressure than ever before, and young athletes are becoming stressed out and burned out on their sports at much higher rates than they did when we were kids.

In this chapter, we provide some ways you can maximize the benefits of your kids' participation in sports, allowing them to have fun, reach their athletic potential, and learn life lessons, all while minimizing stress and burnout.

Decide Whether to Specialize

Today's kids begin the process of specialization almost from the very beginning of their athletic participation. The question many parents ask is whether specialization is a good thing for their kids. We believe that you should wait as long as possible before allowing your child to specialize. Doing so fights off sport burnout, cross-trains your child physically (which allows them to withstand injury better over time), and keeps motivation levels high for all sports in which they are involved.



TIP

Unless your kid enjoys only one sport, you're better off allowing them to play multiple sports as long as possible, particularly because some kids develop more slowly physically than others do. If they someday play at the college level, they can and will specialize at that point.

In general, avoid the idea of specialization. Think more in terms of primary and secondary sports participation. In other words, your kids need to be encouraged to have a primary sport, but also to play one or two other sports on some level. They may want to play these additional sports competitively, and that's great. But the choice of which sport is primary and which ones are secondary will depend on your kids' motivation and whether you have the time and money for those sports.



WARNING

There are numerous disadvantages to playing only one sport continuously for years, especially from an early age. As professionals, we see high school student-athletes who once had the desire to play at the college level decide not to pursue their dream because they're burned out. They've spent too much time, with far too much pressure, playing that sport, and now they want to quit. You can never know for sure whether they would've decided not to play college sports even if they hadn't specialized all those years. But it does appear that athletes who are more balanced don't quit as early and/or have more successful and rewarding college athletic careers.

Granted, it can be difficult not to get caught up in this seeming rat race, as athletes are getting better, stronger, and faster these days. They have more resources and tools that help make them better, including mental training. The key to remember is that motivation needs to drive the bus. If a young student-athlete wants to be their best, they will do so.



ANECDOTE

Todd worked with a golfer who began playing golf his Freshman year in high school. He then committed to playing golf at a DI school. He worked extremely hard for three years, but he never specialized in golf, and yet he still got a scholarship offer in the end.

Kids who participate in multiple sports

- » Learn a variety of athletic skills that can enhance their overall movement and coordination in all sports
- » Are exposed to different types of coaches and athletes and learn how to manage and deal with these different personalities, rules, and systems
- » Learn from the experience of participating in individual sports versus team sports — self-reliance as well as teamwork, for example
- » Lower their chances of developing physical overuse injuries
- » Lower their chances of becoming physically and emotionally burned out because of constant pressure associated with one sport
- » May look better in the eyes of college coaches, many of whom prefer cross-trained athletes



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Some sports demand more time (and specialization) at an earlier age. For example, ice skating and gymnastics are sports in which many athletes start competing at younger ages and have to do so because of the nature of the sport. A 22-year-old gymnast is considered close to retirement. Tennis and golf — two individual and technically oriented sports — require years of training to be competitive in today's world of youth golf and tennis. This doesn't mean that these athletes can't find balance with other sports or interests. Even intramural sports are great outlets for athletes who are involved in time-intensive individual sports at early ages. We highly encourage our student-athletes to make sure they are competing in other sports, even at a recreational level. It does so much good for the mind and body.

Choose the Right League

Choosing the right league for your kid to play in can make a big difference in both their level of enjoyment in competition and how quickly their physical skills improve. Start by evaluating your kid's skill level in comparison to their peers. What are your kid's strengths athletically, and what are their areas for improvement? When you have figured that out, you can go about choosing the right league.



TIP

If you're having trouble assessing your kid's skill level, talk to any coaches they have played for. They should be able to help you identify your kid's individual strengths.

The right league for your kid will strike a balance between being a bit difficult but yet not so difficult that they are always frustrated. You want the level of the league to be slightly above where your kid is athletically. This will encourage them to push themselves to learn new skills, while not posing a tremendous challenge in the meantime.

Make sure to choose a league that fits your kid's desires and motivation, too. Is competition their main reason for playing sports, or are they doing it more for social reasons and to have fun? Do they want a balance between these two things? Know the mission of the league: Is it primarily to be competitive and train skills, or to enhance the social and life skills of sport? Few leagues are either entirely competitive or entirely social, but many leagues lean one way or another. You want a league that matches your own interests and beliefs for your kid in combination with your kid's preferences.

Finding the right club or travel team is an ongoing question posed by parents in our work together. There are many different levels and requirements of every club or travel team. Think of club or travel teams as being on a continuum comprised of many different facets. Some are highly competitive and requiring more money output, travel, and practice time. But within these same clubs, there can be teams for more beginning level skill and ability athletes, and less time, travel, and financial commitments. Figure out the best fit for your child and then match it with a club. And be honest with your child about the financial and time commitments required. If playing on a travel team is going to put time and financial stress on your family, that issue needs to be honestly addressed so that your child understands the commitment and sacrifices made on their behalf.

There are numerous opportunities to play travel or club and they do not need to break your bank account or stress you out in terms of practice and travel requirements. Many clubs have 6-10 different teams available, at different skill levels. We work with numerous volleyball and soccer clubs, for example, in which athletes are placed on a team that fits their competitive level and abilities.

Know What to Say after a Loss

The more competitive your kid is in their sport, the harder it will be for them to take losses well. Here are some general guidelines to follow when talking to your kid after a loss:

» **Wait until your kid engages you to start the conversation.** If you try to force the conversation, you'll just be a source of frustration for your kid.



TIP

- » **Validate your kid's feelings about the loss, no matter what they are.** Frustration, anger, annoyance, and fear are all common emotional reactions to losses. Listen to your kid and express empathy for what they are going through. Again, listening is powerful. No lecture or words of advice are needed at this time. Listening and simply reflecting feelings is one of the most powerful skills you can use at this point with your child.
- » **Let your kid dictate the length and depth of the conversation.** They'll let you know when they want to talk and how much they want to discuss. Trying to force a lesson into the discussion when they are not ready to learn is counterproductive.
- » **Focus on the positives whenever possible.** Losses are tough to deal with, but there is always a silver lining in every loss if you're willing to look hard enough for it. Teach your kid how to do that.

Choosing the ideal time to do so is important on this matter. If your kid isn't too emotional, go ahead and talk to them about the lessons they can learn. If they are still emotional, wait a day or two. When emotions are high, they will have difficulty hearing you anyway. Remember to listen, listen, listen. There is a time and a place for advice.

Be a Fan, not a Coach

When you're the parent of an athlete, you need to figure out how involved you'll become in their athletic life, especially when you're attending games and practices.



TIP

Make sure you're a *fan* — let the coaches do the coaching. They've accepted that role, and you agreed for your kid to be placed under the coaches' mentorship. This doesn't mean you can't question or discuss something with the coaches, but you need to avoid trying to coach your kid at games and practices. Doing so sends a confusing message to your kid and puts them in an awkward position — they won't know whether to listen to the coach or to you, especially if the messages are conflicting.

If you want to coach your kid, you can do so at home, away from their organized practice schedule. Make sure to discuss with them your methods and approach, especially if you're teaching something different from the coach. You can explain that coaches sometimes see things differently and that they should follow their coach's directions.

Avoid bad-mouthing the coach or encouraging your kid to disregard what their coach is teaching or saying. If you do engage in bad-mouthing, it creates problems for everyone, especially your kid. It's okay to encourage your kid to ask the coach for clarification, but remember that the coach has the final say. If you don't like the coach, you can switch teams or leagues at the end of the season, but while your kid is playing under that coach, encourage your kid to be respectful and honor what their coach is trying to teach.



WARNING

If you serve as the official coach for your child, there is consistent discussion that needs to take place about separating your roles of being a coach and being a parent. The relationship with your child as a parent is far more important than your relationship together as coach-athlete. There is also a time to step away as coach. Your child needs to be exposed to other coaches, but also as your child gets older, there are more frequent problems that occur when child and parent try to remain coach and athlete.

Cheer, Don't Yell

It's very natural to become emotionally charged at your kid's game. Sometimes you may feel extreme joy; other times, extreme anger and disappointment. Your role as an adult and parent is to manage your emotions when you're at practices and games, as well as when you're talking with your kid about their sport. One way you can keep your emotions in check is to make sure you're cheering and not yelling at games and practices. You may *feel* like yelling — youth sports can be frustrating for numerous reasons (errors, poor officiating, or questionable coaching). But yelling and *feeling* like yelling are two different matters.

The difference between cheering and yelling lies in your words and your tone of voice. Cheering is made up of positive words, such as pointing out when your kid or their team does well — for example, "Great job!" or "Nice hustle!" Cheering also has an encouraging and positive tone to it.



TIP

A good measure of tone is how other fans perceive you. Do they think you're enjoying yourself or do they think you sound angry and upset? If you're enjoying yourself, your tone will be more positive. If you're not enjoying yourself, your tone may be angry or biting.

Yelling, on the other hand, is more negative in nature and is expressed with anger or hostility. Phrases such as "That was awful!" or "I can't believe you did that!" are examples of yelling. Yelling can also be far worse, such as degrading kids and coaches, using profanity, and even physically assaulting parents, coaches, or officials. With yelling, tone is crucial — you might express the right words, such as

“Hustle!” or “Get the ball!”, but they’re expressed with hostility and venom in your voice.



TIP

If you’re having a tough time controlling yourself, simply walk away. It’s far better to say nothing at all than it is to yell at your kid while they participate in sports. This is also something that we work with — parents who have difficulty creating positive experiences for their children in sport because of their own anger issues or unhappiness.

Talk with Your Kid’s Coach

If you want to support your kid, you need to know what to say when you talk to their coach. Here are our recommendations:

- » **Err on the side of talking less, not more, with your kid’s coach.** Many times, engaging in dialogue with the coach can backfire, even with the best of intentions.
- » **If you must talk with your kid’s coach, know your role.** Your role is to ask the coach how you can best support your kid in their athletic development.
- » **Never, ever try to tell the coach how to do their job.** Just think about how you would feel if someone came to your office and engaged in the same behavior — you’d be offended! Don’t be that parent. Simply seek to understand the coach’s viewpoint, decisions, and methods with your kid.
- » **If you choose to talk to your kid’s coach, choose an appropriate time.** After practice, when you’re picking up your kid, is usually a good time. Before or after games are usually bad times, because the coach has a lot on their mind.
- » **Be sure to seek your kid’s input on whether they feel comfortable having you talking to the coach.** You don’t want to embarrass or humiliate your kid. If you are going to talk with your child’s coach, you need to let them know when it is going to happen and briefly process with them afterward so they do not go to the next practice unprepared.

Reward the Things That Matter

Athletes can control very little outside of their own attitude and effort on the field. This lesson is an important one to teach your kid. If your kid doesn’t get this key point, they’ll face all kinds of disappointment and frustration, because winning and losing are completely beyond of their control.



TIP

Reward your kid for giving good effort, displaying good sportsmanship, managing their emotions, handling pressure, focusing during the game, hustling, communicating well with teammates, and being a team player. These are the things over which your kid has control. When you reward them for the things they can control, you'll see an increase in their self-esteem as an athlete.

As a society, we are habituated to focus on the negative. Part of this is evolutionary, as our brains developed to anticipate pain and avoid it at all costs. But praise can have such a positive impact on your child. Most student-athletes crave praise. There needs to be accountability, of course, but praise is also critically important.

Budget Your Time and Money

As a parent, you'll likely want and need to have a budget for the time and money you'll devote to your kid's sport. Some sports, like soccer, require less individual attention and travel time than other sports like golf or tennis. Some sports, like track and basketball, are less expensive than other sports, like golf and hockey, because of the equipment, coaching, and travel requirements.

The key is not to spend more time or money than you have. You want to make sure that your kid's sports participation doesn't impinge upon your family's resources. If you have more than one kid playing sports, you'll really have to budget your time and money carefully.

Before your kid starts playing sports, decide how much money you can spend for the season. Be realistic and reasonable, and keep yourself to that budget. If you're constantly stressed out because of financial costs related to sports, it will affect your family and can be quite damaging to the home environment. Your kids are very aware and tuned into this possible negative energy and it does create stress, whether they discuss it or not. We see many student-athletes who want to make their parents happy in order to avoid creating stress. If they sense this stress, they will put pressure on themselves to perform, and this rarely works out in a positive way.



TIP

Be sure to talk to your kid about the cost of sports, too. They may have friends who are doing a lot more when it comes to sports, such as getting private instruction or the latest equipment, and those expenses may or may not be a feasible option for your family.

When it comes to the amount of time you devote to your kid's sport, be fair to yourself and your family. Playing multiple sports during a single season or playing on a school team and a travel team simultaneously may not be realistic. If

you're like most parents, you have multiple obligations — from your job to your partner to other kids and extended family not to mention your own activities and interests. Your kid's athletic participation isn't the only thing on your plate, and it shouldn't get all your attention.



REMEMBER

Be upfront with your kid. If they want to play in a second sport or league in a single season, you may have to say no. You're better off setting and sticking to boundaries than you are agreeing and feeling bitter, angry, and stressed all season.

You can expect your kid to be disciplined, show effort, practice hard, and take improvement seriously, especially if they are involved in a sport that requires a substantial investment of time and money. But you can't expect results. You can't expect that your investment of time and money will pay off in a scholarship or fame or even they will even be able to or want to compete at a collegiate level. That is unfair to put on your child

If your kid isn't putting in the necessary effort, ask them how important the sport is to them. If the sport isn't that important long term (for example, they don't want to play in college) and they play for social reasons, then you don't have to invest as much time and money. For example, we tell parents of golfers and tennis players that they don't need to take their kids to national events if the kids aren't motivated enough to work hard to be at those types of events. Local events will do just fine. If your child is really good, they can market themselves to get noticed. They do not necessarily need to travel all over the country. These opportunities can be helpful but are not necessary.



REMEMBER

You can always change your mind throughout the season, either cutting back or investing more in your kid's development as you see fit.

Focus on Learning Life Skills

Organized sports teach kids important life skills — skills that they'll need later in life, on and off the field. Some of these lessons include the following:

- » **Life isn't fair.** Why expect it to be? Sometimes the referee makes a terrible call, and sometimes the coach plays the less talented kid or the kid who doesn't work as hard. Often, the better teams don't win.
- » **Hard work pays dividends.** In general, you get out of sport what you put into it. The harder you work, and the smarter you work, the better the results you'll experience.

- » **Teamwork is important.** The iconic image of the Lone Ranger doing great things by himself is simply a myth. Great teams accomplish much more than great individuals do.
- » **Everybody has a role to play.** Like parts of a car, everybody on a team has an important role to play in order to help the team experience success.
- » **People are counting on you.** If you fail to do your part, your team or your own individual performance (or both!) will suffer.
- » **Anything worth having requires discipline.** Discipline is one of the keys to greatness and success in anything — sports, music, teaching, medicine, or parenthood. With discipline comes results.
- » **Discuss how mental skills translate to the classroom or other places.** If your student-athletes are learning to focus and manage pressure on the athletic field, they can take these skills to all their “performances” — job interviews, academic preparations, exams, SAT/ACTs, and college selection interviews.

Live Your Own Life instead of Living through Your Kid

One of the most important and frequent issues we see as sports psychologists working with children and adolescents is the tendency of many parents to live out their own personal athletic dreams through their kids. Sometimes, the parent was a successful athlete himself back in the day; other times, the parent didn't get to realize all their athletic dreams. Either way, parents invest lots of time and energy into developing the skills of their kids. They hope for a return on their investment, similar to the way they would if they invested in a growth stock. The problem is, kids don't work like the stock market, and neither should you.



REMEMBER

Your kid is a separate person from you. They may have half of your genetic material, but they are an individual, and they deserve to be treated as such. There's nothing wrong with wanting your kid to experience the success you either had or didn't have as a kid, but there is a lot wrong with demanding that they carry the burden of your high expectations with them.



TIP

If you find yourself living and dying by your kid's wins and losses, try to take a step back and get some perspective. Your kid will more than likely have a difficult time telling you that you're being overbearing or irrational with your expectations. The burden falls on you to be self-aware.

Sports are a training ground for life, and the emphasis should be on the lessons your kid learns — lessons that will serve them well throughout the rest of their life.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Understanding your own leadership style as an athlete
- » Learning what motivates your teammates
- » Communicating like a leader
- » Knowing when and when not to lead
- » Facing adversity and success as a leader

Chapter 22

Ten Ways to Be a Better Leader for Your Team

Leadership is an oft-discussed but seldom understood concept, particularly when it comes to athletes and sports participation. The world of sports is a complex and ever-changing world, and leadership styles need to be able to adapt to this crazy, changing world. In this chapter, we discuss ways you can personally be a better leader — for yourself, your teammates, and your coaches. By doing so, you give your team the best chance for success, this season and beyond. So let's get started!

Know Your Style

As the ancient Greek maxim goes, “know thyself.” If you are going to be a leader of other athletes, you need to understand yourself first. After all, if you don't understand who you are and how you react to things, how can you expect to have any certainty and confidence in motivating and leading other athletes into competition?

What are some ways to understand yourself better? Here are a few things that we always recommend to our athletes:

- » **Ask your parents what they think your leadership style is.** They probably know you better than anyone else in the world, and even if they never played sports themselves, their input will be helpful to you in understanding how you lead.
- » **Ask your coaches what they think your leadership style is.** Are you a behind-the-scenes sort of leader? A quiet but hard-working leader? A loud, verbal leader? Or a lead-by-example sort of athlete? Your coaches (ask as many as you can!), past and present, will give you valuable feedback in this regard.
- » **Ask your best friends if they think you are a leader, and if so, in what ways.** Like your family members, they have spent the most time with you, and they have seen you in a variety of situations and contexts, so their feedback can be very helpful.
- » **Use an online tool to test yourself.** There are numerous leadership styles tools and inventories you can find online, some specifically geared to sports, to understand more about your leadership style. Many coaches administer these types of inventories to their players.

Know Your Teammates

Leadership is not just about knowing thyself. Leadership is also, and maybe more importantly, about knowing your teammates and coaches, including their needs, their strengths, and their weaknesses in competition. After all, leadership is about guiding and motivating your teammates to perform their best, particularly when the chips are down and the game is on the line.

The better you know and understand your teammates, the better the leader you can be. You'll know and understand what they need, and when they need it. How can you get to know your teammates better?

- » **Talk to them!** Make sure you spend time (and it doesn't take too much time, anyway) talking with as many of your teammates as possible. You can do this in the locker room, on the sidelines, on the bus, and in school. You can also spend time talking to them in the off-season, which is a great time to connect, since there is less pressure and fewer time constraints.

- » **Watch them.** Watch how your teammates react during practice, and watch how they respond to coaching. Notice what they do in pressure situations. Notice who steps up, and who shies away when things get tough during competition.
- » **Read!** There are numerous good books out there about leadership and about social psychology principles. Read up (or listen to audiobooks or podcasts) to get a better understanding of general principles on reinforcement, motivation, and group dynamics. Doing so will help you be a better leader with your teammates.

Choose Your Moments

Leadership, despite what many say, isn't an all-the-time phenomenon. It really comes down to situations. In any given game or competition, there will be certain important situations in which leadership is crucial. This fact should make you feel less pressure as a leader — you don't need to be on top of your game the entire game. You just need to recognize when to step up, and to what level.

The following are typical moments when leadership is important in sports:

- » **Setting the tone for the off-season.** Human tendency can lead to off-season lack of effort. This is a normal phenomenon with athletes. They work hard during the season and tend to back off a bit during the off-season. Strong leadership can help keep motivation high during the off-season, far from games and competition.
- » **Starting the season.** Every season has to start somewhere. Helping your team get off on the right foot can go a long way toward determining the tenor and tone of your entire season.
- » **Rivalry games.** Emotions run high during rivalry games and can sometimes get out of control. A good leader understands this and can help their team stay collectively level-headed during these games.
- » **Losing streaks.** Losing is hard. It wears on you. A good leader understands that losing can cause teammates to lose motivation and give less effort over time, since losing streaks build feelings of helplessness. Good leaders help counter that by keeping their teammates focused on the process of improvement rather than on the wins or losses.

- » **Winning streaks.** You might be surprised to see this listed here. After all, winning makes everything easier, right? Right. However, winning can also cause effort to wane over time, and players can take teams and outcomes for granted. Good leaders don't let that happen, if they can help it.
- » **Playoff or tournament games.** Emotions run high, and the stakes are higher during playoff and tournament games. Leaders understand this and help keep their teammates focused on the tasks ahead of them as a team, no matter the stakes.
- » **Times of conflict.** When a person or two is creating conflict or dissention on the team or not giving their full effort, the team needs a leader. This can be one of the hardest leadership moments, especially for young student-athletes. For example, when a player is not giving their full effort or has violated a team rule, this situation needs addressed. Sometimes it is helpful to talk with other leaders, or captains, or adults before confronting a potentially volatile situation.

There are many crucial moments when strong leadership can make the difference between winning and losing. We have listed several here, but this list isn't meant to be all-inclusive.

Understand Motivation

If you want to be a better leader, you need to know a little bit about motivation, and understand what motivates people. You'll need to know, also, what demotivates people, and how these concepts apply to sports competition. Motivation by itself is the basis for many books, but for the sake of improving your leadership, you can understand this complex topic better by reading Chapter 4.



REMEMBER

It's important to understand the difference between *intrinsic* (from within) motivation and *extrinsic* (from outside of yourself) motivation, and how they interact in complex ways within each individual.

Find Your Sweet Spot as a Leader

Finding your sweet spot as a leader means working to find that zone where your efforts produce maximum results for your team. It is more of an art than a science, really, and it takes practice and time to learn to find your sweet spot as a leader. Knowing when to exert leadership, and to what degree, is the battle that

you will fight as you work to find your sweet spot. You can improve your ability in this area by watching film, having discussions with people you trust, studying motivation off the field, and through experience.



TIP

Like most things in life, you'll become wiser the more experiences you gather over time. Your leadership abilities as a senior in high school or college, for example, will be much greater than your leadership abilities as a freshman, simply because of life experience. Be sure to give yourself some slack here, and understand that the key is to keep improving. Look at your leadership ability as you would any other skill — it takes time and practice to get better at it. Becoming a great leader is a practice — it's always in development.

Communicate More Effectively

If you want to communicate better, you have to understand that communication is not just about the words you use. Good communication is a process composed of:

- » Listening to what is said
- » Hearing the other person accurately
- » Understanding what they mean
- » Formulating your own intentional message
- » Speaking that message in a way that can be understood
- » Verifying that the other person understood your message

In other words, try not to take the process of communication lightly, since it really is a complex process and interaction between two people.

Another aspect of improving your communication is to reduce the two types of *interference* — or things that interfere with communicating effectively with another person. These two types of interference are:

- » **Cognitive or mental interference.** Your values, background, culture, beliefs, emotional state, and current thoughts.
- » **Environmental interference.** The timing, situation, context, and environment in which you are attempting to communicate.

Cognitive or mental interference damages the message we either intend to convey or the message we are attempting to hear from the other person, whereas environmental interference disrupts the transmission of the message from one person to another. Both interrupt effective communication, and the key is to reduce both if you want to be a better communicator.



TIP

Another important factor to consider is *non-verbal communication*. It is stated that 80 percent of our communication is non-verbal — meaning our body language, tone, and so on. Be aware of your non-verbal communication. When it is not effective, the message — not matter how good it may be — is not heard if you are displaying negative body language.

Also keep in mind when texting or communicating via your smartphone that body language and tone are absent. Be especially careful when you send communication via text or email. One of the things to remember about communication is that what you say is not what they hear and what they say is not what you hear. Communication is a complicated and subtle process and your intentions can be misinterpreted when you communicate via text or email.



TIP

You can reduce cognitive or mental interference in your communication in several ways:

- » **Be aware of that everyone has mental interference they can bring to a conversation.** We're all human, and each of us has a unique personality and background. Accept this fact and be aware of how it can affect your communication.
- » **If you must assume something about the person you're communicating with, assume that the other person is intelligent and fully able to understand what you're trying to say.** Assume also that the other person will question you if they have any difficulties understanding the content of your message. Assume that people have their and your best intentions in mind. If they do not, it will come out in the long run and you can make changes accordingly.
- » **Work to constantly improve your self-awareness in social situations.** For example, try to become more aware of your body language when you're talking. Pay attention to your tone of voice and your word choice, too.
- » **State opinions as opinions, which are subject to change at your discretion.** Too often, people state opinions as facts.
- » **Before conveying a message, ask yourself what your intention is.** Are you trying to add to the discussion, or get a point across? Are you trying to be right instead of trying to be helpful? By clarifying your message in this way — prior to communicating it — you'll communicate better and more clearly with others.

- » **Be focused.** How many times have you looked at your phone when someone is trying to communicate with you? Too many, if you are like most of us. If you are trying to communicate effectively and want to get optimal results, put your phone aside and any other distractions that could get in the way.

Be Brave

Being brave — or doing the right thing, even when you are feeling fearful or anxious — is a key component to good leadership. Bravery isn't easy, either. Our natural reaction during times of extreme stress is to back away, to protect ourselves, and to evaluate the level of threat around us. So, if you want to be brave, you need to counter your natural tendency and train yourself to perform the task before you, no matter what is happening. Some ways to do this can include:

- » Volunteer to be a leader every chance you get. Practice makes (nearly) perfect!
- » Seek out stressful situations (speeches, for example) so you can get more comfortable doing things you may not feel comfortable doing.
- » Focus on what you gain, not on what you lose, by taking a chance in a given situation.
- » Ask yourself, "Why not?" instead of "Why?" when you are facing a tough decision.
- » Hang out with people who support your decisions and care for you unconditionally.
- » Ask for help. Being curious and vulnerable are two of the most powerful qualities and skills you can develop. You do not need to be perfect.

Know When to Lead and When to Back Off

Remember that an important part of good leadership is knowing when to turn it on, and when to turn it off. You might be asking yourself, "Why would you ever want to back off being a leader?" Well, here are some situations that might warrant backing off and leaving things alone for the time being:

- » **Immediately after a crushing or heartbreaking loss.** Emotions are running high, and nobody is in the mood to be talked to, lectured, or consoled after such a big loss. Wait a bit before you exert some leadership.

- » **When there is other leadership on the team.** Maybe you are one of the younger players on a team that has older, more experienced leaders. This is a good time to let them lead. Watch how they interact so that you can learn and apply those lessons to your own leadership style.
- » **When your team is fractured or divided.** In situations like this, it can be best to sit back, evaluate what is going on, and exert leadership in a quiet, more subtle way. Choosing a side can backfire on you quickly.



REMEMBER

Listening and observing are very powerful forms of leadership. This is when you learn the most. In some ways, when it comes to words, less is more.

Take the Blame

As a leader, when you sit in the big chair, it is important to understand that one of your informal responsibilities is to take the blame when things do not go well. Does this mean that the problems are your fault? Not at all. Does this mean admitting that you aren't a good leader? Not a chance. What it means is that you take your role seriously, and to that end, you take the blame for your team's failures and mistakes. It is the right thing to do. Doing this has a positive effect on your teammates — especially when they know that you are not the cause of the mistakes — and they will quietly appreciate you taking the blame (or taking the heat, as some say) on their behalf. When we hold ourselves accountable as part of the problem and part of the solution, it leads to respect and great leadership. The best leaders don't have big egos.

Spread the Fame

Just as it is important to take the blame when things aren't going well, it is equally important that you understand the importance of spreading the fame when things are going well.

When a team is successful, it's common practice to interview the team leadership. When that individual is you, make sure that you make it a point to positively reinforce your teammates and give them all the credit possible. Spread it around for all to enjoy, like jam on a peanut butter sandwich! This is an even more powerful technique when you personally enjoyed a good game, and obviously played a large role in your team's success. By spreading the fame around for everyone to enjoy, you display humility and a team-first attitude. This is extremely motivating to your teammates and coaches. Simple praise of others, even for the smallest of things, makes a big difference.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Aiden, Gable, and Selima Smith, who are my greatest teachers, and to Emma, my rock, and the smartest and most loving woman I know. This book is also dedicated to Todd Kays, my good friend and coauthor, who shared my dream of bringing this book to life over ten years ago.

—Leif H. Smith, PsyD

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