

INSIDE THE MIND OF A CHAMPION



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What sets an Olympic gold-medalist apart from an athlete with similar natural talent? What helps one team win a national championship title versus finishing in second place?

These are questions often asked by parents, sports fans, coaches, and athletes themselves. Sport psychologists, along with some of the greatest athletes and coaches offer the same answer: **it's an athlete's mindset that truly distinguishes a champion.** This article explores the inner workings of a great athlete's mindset and discusses some of the key qualities that set him or her apart from the competition. Additionally, the authors will identify skills that sport psychologists often teach athletes to help them **train their brains to think like champions.**

Mental Characteristics of a Champion

"Champions are not made in gyms. Champions are made from something they have deep inside them - a desire, a dream, a vision. They have to have the skill, and the will. But the will must be stronger than the skill." - *Muhammad Ali*

Jones et al. (2002) defines the term "*mental toughness*" as: an **innate or developed** psychological edge that allows an athlete to be more consistent and cope more effectively than his/her opponents. Athletes with an enhanced sense of mental toughness have this electrifying drive, or as Muhammad Ali termed it this "*will*" to succeed, that can almost feel tangible in great sports moments. This drive helps these athletes to stay focused, determined, and positive even under the greatest pressure. Any avid sports fan can attest to a time when their favorite team, against all odds, came back to win. As psychologists, we can help athletes develop mental toughness by building a strong foundation based on the cognitive cornerstones of **motivation, confidence, and resiliency.**

Motivation

Mentally tough athletes have great intrinsic motivation. They show an intense desire and determination to succeed. When coaches talk about champion athletes, common descriptions often include such statements as "she was the one who stayed late everyday to practice

her free-throws," or "he was the one who fought for every inch on the football field."

To increase motivation, mentally tough athletes set realistic but challenging short and long term goals, and in turn use their goals as a source of inner motivation (Jones 2008). Their goals and dreams are the reason they continue to endure grueling practices, spend extra hours in the gym conditioning, and why they get right back up after falling down. It's not that these athletes don't become fatigued or feel defeated when they lose; rather, it's because it is during these times that they remind themselves, "I am doing this because I want to play tennis in college," or "I want to make it to the Olympic track team." In the words of gold medalist Gabby Douglas, "Hard days are the best because that is when champions are made." To help athletes have the motivation of a champion, sport psychologists work with them on goal setting exercises and identifying positive role models in their sport.

Building Confidence

Mentally tough athletes often exude a sense of confidence. Their confidence and optimism helps them to view competition as just another hurdle that they will clear with the right practice and effort. Confident athletes know what they want, practice hard, and trust themselves to perform under pressure. This sense of confidence is built on a solid foundation that has developed slowly over time and through countless hours of practice. These athletes also have an awareness of what it took to get to their current level of skill.

To help athletes build confidence, sport psychologists use similar tools to those applied in clinical situations. Confidence-building work often includes psychoeducation regarding the power of positive thinking and how to increase positive self-talk. It can also include helping athletes frame their mistakes or losses as learning experiences. Sport psychologists encourage athletes to practice these mental skills just as much as they practice the physical skills their coaches teach them.

Resiliency

"I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed." – *Michael Jordan*

Mentally tough athletes rebound more easily from defeat; they often view setbacks as opportunities for improvement. As previously discussed, athletes are no strangers to adversity; they are used to overcoming physical pain, training when tired or in unfavorable weather conditions, and giving 100% every minute of a game. However, the most successful athletes are those who persevere both mentally and physically, and use setbacks as opportunities for growth. Having faced a challenge or a loss, mentally tough athletes push themselves to perform at a higher level the next time around. They see adversity as temporary - merely a part of their process to achieve their goals.

Some athletes present with an innately resilient temperament, while others have acquired resilience by successfully overcoming obstacles. However, for both groups of athletes, resilience and essential mental toughness, needs to be continually maintained. Sport psychologists work with athletes on fostering these characteristics by focusing on their strengths, coping skills, and future goals.

Mindfulness for Athletes

"In basketball, as in life, true joy comes from being fully present in each and every moment, not just when things are going your way." - *Phil Jackson*

Mindfulness practices are gaining popularity, along with scientific efficacy as an innovative approach to working with athletes in sports psychology. Kabat-Zinn (2003) defines mindfulness as a state of awareness and an attunement to the present, without judgment. The ability to be a keen observer in the present is a tremendous asset to any athlete. In sports, this state of mindfulness is referred to as being "in the zone," with a relaxed concentration that is both effortless and flowing. The ability to focus intentionally can help athletes maintain their skills under intense pressure, and gives them an edge over their competition.

Applying the concept of mindfulness to sport psychology offers an exciting approach. It allows the psychologist to encourage mental flexibility in athletes. Thoughts profoundly impact performance, so positive and centered mental constructs enhance an athlete's ability. Unlike traditional approaches, which suggest that negative thoughts or emotions should

be eliminated, mindfulness focuses on increasing one's awareness of thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations. Within this approach, sport psychologists teach athletes that they can decide which thoughts to follow to create a positive outcome. Additionally, the energy used to contain negative thoughts can instead be focused on to empower one's athletic performance.

There are specific mindfulness tools that can be used by a sport psychologist. The first is the use of breath. Focusing on rhythmic slow breathing can be grounding, can increase self-awareness, and can be used as a mechanism to help the athlete control his/her reactions. The breath can slow down the central nervous system, and align the respiration rate, heart rate, and the mind. As psychologists, if we are able to help athletes breathe in a more relaxed manner, they can be calmer and more centered in high-pressured competition.

Three main components of mindfulness are: awareness, acceptance, and action (Eiring & Hathaway, 2010). Psychologists can help athletes to be mindful by teaching these skills:

1. AWARENESS

- Focus on the breath as a tool for centering
- Observe the mind and body in the present moment without judgment
- Focus on sensations in the body (body-scan)
- Focus on thoughts and messages given by oneself

2. ACCEPTANCE

- Acknowledge thoughts, emotions, and sensations and label them (e.g., "I am feeling tense in my body" or "I am thinking I can't do this")
- Acceptance of thoughts and feelings
- Decide which thoughts to follow and which ones to change

3. ACTION

- Focus on the breath, counting, or a focal point
- Find replacement language that supports the goal (e.g., "I can do this," "I am focused")
- Focus on a mantra (e.g., "I am strong, prepared, and able")
- Take one step at a time, and practice

Our role as psychologists is to help athletes develop tools to stay in the present, clear their minds of past experiences (losses or limiting thoughts) and then to focus on repeating positive affirmations or key words that can increase their confidence and mental strength. In the end, the athlete with the greatest concentration and the least amount of distraction has the best chance of success.

Creating Consistency

“Luck has nothing to do with it, because I have spent many, many hours, countless hours, on the court working for my one moment in time, not knowing when it would come.” – *Serena Williams*

Once athletes have developed the ability to be mindful, the next step is to teach them how to consistently perform well. The greatest athletes of all time are the ones who are able to be consistent. For example, consider Amy Wambach, one of the stars of the Women’s Olympic Soccer Team, who came through for her team when it mattered most, time and time again. She will certainly be remembered as one of the greatest female soccer players for her spirit, consistency, and unwavering focus and determination.

The need for consistency in training and competition can be instrumental in helping athletes to regularly perform at their optimal level. However, a number of factors can interfere with an athlete’s ability to perform at a consistently high level in training and competition, including but not limited to the following: one’s physical, psychological, and emotional states, the significance of the event, and environmental/social influences (Schack, Whitmarsh, Pike, & Redden, 2005).

One way to target consistency is by creating routines. A routine can be defined as a series of behaviors organized into a comprehensive plan aimed at maximizing the performance (Schack et al., 2005). Routines are one of the most effective ways to systematically plan for success. They play a critical role in athletes’ preparation for competition and have been shown to be effective **before, during, and after competition**. Athletes who develop routines for all aspects of their athletic experience and adapt them to their performance give themselves the best chance of success.

Routines form the physical, psychological, and environmental foundation on which technical skills, physical conditioning, and mental skills can be optimally developed in training and used in competition. *Between-performance routines* (for sports that involve a series of short performances, such as golf) enable athletes to maintain a high level of performance consistency throughout a competition. *Post-competition routines* allow athletes to evaluate their performances, learn important lessons from the competition, and use that information to prepare for future training and competitions.

Routines can become as essential to performance as proper equipment, good technique, and effective

tactics. They allow athletes to identify areas of their training and competition that they can control, and to then take responsibility for these aspects of their preparation.

Conclusion

On the heels of the London 2012 Olympics, the mental aspect of an athlete’s preparation and performance has never been so apparent. It is evident that an athlete’s mindset distinguishes them from their competition. Sport psychology pulls from a strength-based, positive psychology model and can offer an inspirational way of working with all of our clients. This approach emphasizes the importance of recognizing clients’ strengths and using life’s challenges as opportunities to increase resilience.

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