

# Key Areas and Strategies of Mental Training to Enhance Performance in Sport

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Mental training in sport is about performance enhancement. The goal of this session is to try and increase your awareness of how much one's mental approach affects performance in sport and how you can train mental skills like physical skills. There is a consensus that once you achieve a certain technical and physical level in sport that the difference is mostly mental such as we often witness at the highest professional and Olympic levels of performance.

## Key Areas Influencing Mental Performance Include:

### Confidence

*The belief in one's ability to perform the task required effectively and to manage the pressure and circumstances around competition. All successful athletes have confidence in their ability to perform under pressure. Self-confidence translates into personal trust and is gained through awareness of personal progress from the time and effort invested in developing/refining the skills involved.*

### Attention/concentration/focus

*The ability to successfully focus on relevant stimuli, stay on task and not become distracted by stimuli that can affect performance negatively. Focusing on task relevant processes in sport is a fundamental component of successful performance. Focus on the task, not the outcome. Outcome takes care of itself if the task is done well.*

### Anxiety/Arousal

*Mental/physical anxiety and arousal are important components of performance and can be both very positive and very negative if not effectively managed. Anxiety and arousal cause the mind and body to become highly activated (i.e. heightened concentration, increased heart rate, muscle tension) which is required for enhanced performance in sport, but can also cause excessive nervousness, physical tightening, mental freezing and the phenomenon known as "choking" if too great. The key is to find one's optimal level of arousal for personal best performances.*

### Attribution

*To what does one attribute their success or failure? Attribution speaks directly to the sense of personal control over one's performance. Athletes who attribute their success to their personal effort and skills feel more in control of their performance. Conversely athletes who attribute results to outside factors such as officials, luck or strength/weakness of opponents tend to feel less in control and often helpless.*

### Motivation

*Humans have a need to achieve, to be competent. It is a motivating force that is enhanced and sustained when derived internally (intrinsic) rather than externally (extrinsic). Motivation is strengthened through internal attribution, balancing challenges with skills, and the building of confidence by achieving personal goals.*

## Key Strategies used in Enhancing Performance Through Mental Training:

### Goal Setting

*Goal setting allows an individual to set targets for themselves that motivate and allow one to measure progress, which in turn helps build confidence. Goals can be short term (i.e. adjust technique), midterm (i.e. learn new technique) and long term (i.e. move up a performance level, win a championship). Goals should be developed by the athlete to take ownership and responsibility for those goals. Goals should also be reevaluated regularly to ensure that they are still relevant and appropriately challenging, but achievable.*

### Relaxation Techniques

*It is theorized that one cannot be tense and relaxed at the same time. Therefore learning how to relax in tense situations helps manage excessive anxiety/arousal and allow an athlete to remain calm and focused. Relaxation techniques include controlled proper breathing combined with positive imagery. Also taking time-outs or more time between play to settle down the rushed state feeling when anxious and stressed.*

### Mental Imagery/Visualization

*There is a direct correlation between how the mind sees actions and situations and how they can then be physically performed. An athlete who can positively visualize their ability to perform an action or sequence successfully has a much greater chance of actually performing that action/sequence than an athlete who cannot visualize himself or herself successfully. This is where the expression, “as you think, so you are” comes from.*

### Self-Talk/Cue Words

*We constantly talk to ourselves. If the talk is positive and success oriented, then we are directing ourselves mentally, emotionally and physically towards success. If the self-talk is negative (i.e. I just can't do this, I always perform badly in this situation) then we are directing ourselves towards failure and low confidence. Successful athletes use positive self-talk and specific cue words/expressions to help stay focused and positively oriented.*

### Rituals/Routines

*Rituals, also known as routines, are combinations of mental, behavioural, physical and nutritional strategies to help us achieve our ideal performance state (IPS). These strategies help us physically and mentally prepare and focus on our performance tasks. Routines can be personally customized to suite the athletes' style and personality and must be practiced like any other skill to become automatic.*

### Personal Journal

*Allows an athlete to monitor their progress (towards goals) and express their feelings and beliefs. Helps identify certain trends that may confirm or challenge an athletes' belief about their current training/ performance level.*

**Note:** All these strategies/skills are trainable and allow an athlete to take control of their mental approach to performance. The training of mental skills should be treated with the same respect and diligence as technical/physical skills requiring athletes and coaches to make a **commitment** to this critical area for true progress to be achieved.