Mental Strength Training For Athletes
~ Strategies and Tactics to Achieve Peak Performance ~

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Part One – The Foundation
This book will be divided up into two sections - Section One is the Foundation and Section Two is the Tool Box.

The Foundation is help you get an overview of The Tool Box, what is mental strength training and how your mind works. The Foundation will assist you in using the tools in the Tool Box section.

Section Two – The Tool Box is the nuts and bolts of the Mental Strength Training Playbook. The chapters in Section Two will provide you the information required to put together your personal Mental Strength Playbook.

Overview

In this book you will be given all the resources possible for you to learn about mental strength and develop your personal Mental Strength Training Playbook.

The book will go over 13 crucial steps that must be part of your playbook. These steps are:

Step 1: The Benefits of Mental Strength Training

In step 1 of your Mental Strength Training Playbook, you understand the scope of mental strength training and what mental strength skills can do for you and your performance.

Objective:

The objective of this mental strength lesson is for you to understand the role mental strength training plays in performance enhancement. You have to understand and believe in the power of mental strength training.

Mental Strength Training Tasks:

- Understand what mental strength training can and can't do for you.
- Know what issues/problems mental strength training does not address.
- Be committed to your Mental Strength Training Playbook and program.

Step 2: Assessing Your Sports Mental Toughness

In step 2 of your Mental Strength Training Playbook, you'll assess your mental strength skill, you'll find out your strengths and weaknesses. You'll take the Mental Strength online assessment to help you identify what to work on with Mental Strength Training.

Objective:

The objective of this mental strength lesson is to assess your mental strength capacity and to identify your strengths and weaknesses. This will allow you to focus your energy on the areas of your mental strength training that you can improve the most.

Mental Strength Training Tasks:

- Identify your mental skill strengths.
- Identify your mental skill weaknesses.
- Make a list of the mental strength training phases you need most.
**Step 3: Mental Strength Training Formula for Success**

In step 3 of your Mental Strength Training Playbook, you will identify and eradicate self-limiting expectations that affect your performance.

**Objective:**

The objective of this mental strength lesson is to identify expectations that hold you back and replace with confidence and manageable objectives called process goals.

**Mental Strength Training Tasks:**

- Replace expectations with “process” goals.
- Identify “process” goals you can focus on instead of expectations.
- Replace expectations with confidence.

**Step 4: Concentration Skills**

In step 4 of your Mental Strength Training Playbook, you'll identify important performance cues that help you focus on the process of executing a task based behavior, i.e. swinging the bat, throwing the ball, etc.

**Objective:**

The objective of this mental strength lesson is to identify task-relevant performance cues, task-irrelevant cues (distractions), and learn how to refocus when distracted.

**Mental Strength Training Tasks:**

- List the task-relevant performance cues in the tasks you perform often.
- Identify the irrelevant cues that are only distractions to the execution of that skill.
- Practice your refocusing skills when you get off-task.

**Step 5: Improve Your Self-Confidence**

In step 5 of your Mental Strength Training Playbook, you will learn how to improve your self-confidence and to enhance your personal performance by being proactive with your confidence.

**Objective:**

The objective of this mental strength lesson is for you to understand the thoughts and behaviors that lead to and destroy confidence. By the end of the lesson you should know how to be proactive with your confidence and be able to eliminate doubts that undermine your confidence.

**Mental Strength Training Tasks:**

- Identify your assets that support your confidence with a confidence resume.
- Develop the self-talk of champions and control your inner dialog.
- Reframe your doubts before they knock over your confidence.
Step 6: Improve Composure & Emotional Control

In step 6 of your Mental Strength Training Playbook, you will develop strategies to help you let go of mistakes, perform play to play, and maintain composure during competition.

Objective:

The objective of this mental strength lesson is to develop mental strength skills that improve your composure and emotional control. This includes performing well under pressure and coping with frustration after mental errors.

Mental Strength Training Tasks:

- Identify the mental breakdowns that cause a loss of composure.
- Develop a pre-game routine to improve your composure during competition.
- Apply the Three R’s for emotional control after mistakes; Recognize–Regroup–Refocus.

Step 7: Enhancing Trust in Yourself

In step 7 of your Mental Strength Training Playbook, you learn the concept of trust in yourself, and how to trust your practice and training so you can perform your best.

Objective:

The objective of this mental strength lesson is to understand the difference between the training and trusting mindsets, identify the breakdowns in trust that inhibit your ability to trust, and develop skills to enhance your trust.

Mental Strength Training Tasks:

- List 2-3 ways that your trust breakdown when you go from practice to competition (i.e. lack of confidence, trying too hard, over control).
- Identify the thoughts and actions that lead to increased trust such as simplifying your pre-competition routine.
- Keep track of your trust breakdowns in competition by recording them after the event.

Step 8: Identifying Ineffective Belief Systems

In step 8 of your mental training plan, you will identify ineffective beliefs and thoughts that have a negative impact of your performance, so you can eliminate these and replace with a healthy belief system.

Objective:

The objective of this mental strength plan is to identify the core beliefs that sabotage your performance such as negative self-labels ("I'm too small", “I’m too slow”), identify and dispute doubts about your ability, and flush out any expectations or generalizations that limit your performance.

Mental Strength Training Tasks:

- List three positive self-labels to describe your strengths as an athlete.
- Change any irrational beliefs about your role such as "I must be perfect" and replace with a better belief.
- Note any beliefs that get in the way of confidence and composure during a conflict.
Step 9: Goal Setting for Success

In week 9 of your Mental Strength Training Playbook, you will learn how goal setting works and how to set appropriate long-term, mid-term, and short-term performance goals.

Objective:

The objective of this mental strength lesson is to help you understand the different types of goals you can set for your performance. By the end of the lesson you will be able to set goals that are challenging and specific, as well as know how to include process goals for practice and competition.

Mental Strength Training Tasks:

- First, select the long-term goals you would like to achieve in the next one year.
- Define the mid-term goals you need to improve to reach your long-term goals.
- Define the short-term practice and engagement goals you want to achieve along with daily process goals.

Step 10: Developing Effective Pre-Game Routines

In step 10 of your Mental Strength Training Playbook, you will develop a structured pre-game routine that will help you mentally prepare for the competition.

Objective:

The objective of this mental strength lesson is to develop a structured pre-game routine, by applying all the previous mental skills you have learned such as, how to be confident, focused, and in a trusting state of mind when before your competition.

Mental Strength Training Tasks:

- Read "Get Psyched" in this course.
- Write down your pre-engagement routine and create a mental preparation checklist
- Modify your pregame routine as needed to adjust your pregame mindset.

Step 11: Improving Practice Efficiency

In step 11 of your Mental Strength Training Playbook, you will learn strategies to improve your practice efficiency to get the most out of your practice by using the principles of motor learning.

Objective:

The objective of this mental strength lesson is to help you instill focused practice in a way that transfers well to a real event, so you are able to transfer practice confidence to a real event.

Mental Strength Training Tasks:

- List the top four principles from motor learning what will help you improve your learning and practice efficiency.
- How will you apply these principles to your practice routines?
- What changes do you have to make to your practice intensity, focus, and practice drills to increase practice specificity?
Step 12: Developing Focused Pre-shot Routines

Optional – Depending on Player/Position

In step 13 of your Mental Strength Training Playbook, you will learn how to develop an effective pre-shot routine for self-paced tasks or race starts by understanding the components of a pre-shot routine.

Objective:

The objective of this mental strength lesson is to help you understand the components of a pre-shot routine (consistency, focus on the process, confidence, and trust), so you are able to develop, practice, and apply your pre-shot routine to competition.

Mental Strength Training Tasks:

- Define your current pre-shot routines (mental and physical) for the various tasks you perform in your sport.
- Integrate the missing mental components of a good pre-shot routine as indicated in this section.
- Be able to identify breakdowns in your mental routine quickly and refocus on the task.

Step 13: Assessing Your Performance

Do you beat yourself up, get upset, and lose confidence after a poor performance in a game or race? You are not alone. Many athletes I work with—as many as 75%—reprimand themselves after a defeat or a loss. In this section, you'll learn the strategies to grow your self-confidence by assessing your performance more wisely.

Objective:

If self-confidence is the name of the game in sports, it’s critical that you learn how to grow your confidence after each competition, instead of rip it apart with self-critical thinking.

Mental Strength Training Tasks:

- Be more subjective with your performance
- Use Mistakes as an Opportunity to Improve
- Pat yourself on the back
Introduction

When is Mental Strength Training Useful?

Many athletes and coaches are confused about the role of mental strength training in improving athletic performance. Mental strength training is part of the larger field of sport science and studies human behavior in the sport environment and the benefits of mental training on enhancing sports performance.

The goal of mental strength training is to help athletes and teams perform their best by improving the necessary mental skills to excel in a sporting endeavor. Mental strength training is not about working with problem athletes or abnormal behavior.

Mental strength training is the segment of mental strength training that concentrates specifically on coaching athletes on how to break through the mental barriers that keep them from performing up to their peak potential and by teaching mental skills for success. By focusing on the mental strategies needed to be successful in any competition, mental strength training seeks to achieve the overall goal of performance improvement and enhancing consistency in performance.

I prefer to use the title “mental strength training and coaching” because I think athletes can relate to this title better than “sports psychologist,” as mental strength training and coaching is another facet of performance enhancement. I make sure my clients understand that I am not trained in traditional “psychopathology” nor have a license to practice psychology.

My professional background is in neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), personal coaching, sports hypnotherapy, mental skills coach, Timeline Empowerment®, strength and conditioning, personal training and aspects of sports psychology.

My experience also comes from the sports world as a former athlete, coach, and for the last several years, as a mental strength coach to competitive, tactical and combat athletes.

Unfortunately, for mental coaches, the field of “psychology” still carries a negative stigma because many people perceive mental strength training as dealing with abnormal individuals or problem athletes. However, this is not what I do the majority of the time. In certain situations some from of intervention is useful.

My role is to help athletes develop mental skills for success in sports only. I work with driven and committed individuals who are under additional perceived pressures to perform in their sport. My goals are to teach athletes how to be more confident, focus better, stay composed under pressure, practice more efficiently, and develop more effective pregame routines. I become an extension of the athlete’s support team.

Unlike a psychotherapist or psychologist, I do not use couches, prescribe medicines, or work with abnormal behavior. The main difference between a mental strength coach and a psychotherapist is that a mental strength coaches work with athletes on sports performance enhancement and not personal challenges (such as divorce, grief counseling) or abnormal behavior. Again, this 90% of what I do. In certain situations, when it is useful and depending in the circumstance I will assist an athlete with “personal” issues if it affecting their game.

Another myth that most athletes maintain is the view that mental and physical aspects of sport are separate. Some athletes falsely belief that you must first master “perfect” technique or mechanics before you can work on attitude, mindset, or mental skills.
It has been scientifically proven, and it is my philosophy, that you cannot separate the mental from the physical when it comes to performance or any behavior for that fact.

Decisions, thoughts, images, and feelings drive motor behavior. Mental strength training helps athletes develop confidence and focusing skills in conjunction with the mastery of the technical aspects of sport.

How do you know when you need or could benefit from mental strength training? I start by asking some important questions. Are you performing up to the ability you have shown? Do you perform as well in competition as you do in practice or qualifying? I am sure you know some fellow athletes who have been labeled with “great talent” or physical skills, but have not performed up to their full potential.

This is a primary sign that one’s mindset may be getting in the way of performance. Here are some other questions to consider:

- Are you so self-conscious that you worry about what others think about your performance?
- Do you have any doubts about your sport before or during competition?
- Do you get so anxious that you don't have a calm mind or think straight in competition? Are you motivated by a fear of failure and does this affects your performance in competition?
- Do you get distracted easily by things that go on around you in your environment?
- Do you become easily frustrated when things do not go according to plan?

**When is Mental Strength Training Needed?**

There are several indicators that mental strength training or coaching can help you rise above mental challenges and get more out of your talent. Below is a partial list of the common signals that a mental barrier is holding you back from peak performance.

- You perform much better in practice than during competition. Your practice game is flawless, but in competition, your performance is below par.

- You feel confident and loose in practice and then are plagued with doubt or indecision in the competitive arena. Something changes between practice and competition, but you just cannot put your finger on what it is. Usually fear of failure or tension holds you back.

- You have too many perfectionist qualities. Many athletes think that when they are successful, perfectionism is the reason why. Yes, there are some advantages to perfectionism such as high motivation and being goal-oriented. However, many perfectionist characteristics hold athletes back from success, such as holding onto high, unrealistic expectations, being overly critical of self, trying too hard, and getting easily frustrated.

- You don’t perform well when others are watching you. When others who you care about, (such as parents, fans, coaches) watch you perform, you become too self-conscious of their presence and lose your focus on the task.

- Often you may even worry about letting others down or failing in front of others, similar to stage fright or fear of embarrassment. Most likely you are afraid to embarrass yourself in front of others who are watching you perform because you fear how your performance might reflect on you as an athlete or a person.
• You maintain doubt about your sport before or during games. You perform with a lot of confidence in practice and gain confidence from practice, but when you play your sport for real, you start to entertain doubts about your ability to get the job done. I call this “competitive self-confidence” as opposed to “practice self-confidence.” You start to think, “Can I really beat this person across the net?” “Do I have what it takes to strike out this batter?” Doubts can be disguised subtly in the form of a simple question. When you question your ability to perform, it is really doubt in disguise. In the absence of confidence, you have doubt. When you have doubts, confidence suffers.

• You feel anxious or scared when you perform in competition. You perform freely and loose in practice and do not have many worries, but in games, you are paralyzed by fear and anxiety. Most often, athletes with a fear of failure get tight and anxious in games because they want to win so badly or have are afraid of embarrassment. Fear of failure causes you to try too hard and worry too much about outcomes.

• You limit your performance with strict expectations. With large amounts of practice and success in competition, comes both confidence and higher expectations. Confidence is what you want to let ride, but maintaining strict expectations equates to pressure, judgments, and demands you place on yourself. I spend a lot of time with athletes helping them identify limiting expectations and parking them in the locker room or parking lot prior to performance. I’ll talk more about this later in this book.

• You attach your self-worth to your ability to perform. Some athletes are driven to compete because of the rewards that come from being successful: fame, accolades, and respect. You have a desire to get your name in the paper, get praise from others, or rewards from your parents. These motivators, although help you feel better about yourself as a person, are not the best type of motivators. When you are doing well in sports, it’s easy for you to feel good about yourself, but when not performing well, it’s harder to feel good about yourself, as you attach your level of success to self-worth.

• You lose focus during crunch-time. When up to bat with the bases loaded, two outs and the game tied, you have trouble thinking clearly because of the pressure to produce for your coach, teammates, or fans. You forget the count or don’t pay attention to the sign from the coach. You commit simple mental errors that you wouldn’t normally do in other less threatening situations because you are unable to clear your mind and focus on the task.

• After an injury, you are physically 100% recovered, but you can’t perform the way you did pre-injury. Many athletes who have sustained a major sports injury have trouble regaining their confidence post-injury. Even after the doctor gives you a clean bill of health, your mental scars have not healed. You may be afraid of re-injury and this causes you to play tentatively.

• Alternatively, you may have lost your confidence and wonder if you can return to previous performance levels pre-injury.

• You have a burning desire to get better. You may not have an identifiable mental challenge or mental block in your sport, but you want to improve your mental game and win more. You think mental game coaching or mental training can help you improve and get to the next level. You want to do everything you can to get the edge over your competition, including the mental edge.

As stated previously, some people still think that mental strength training, because of the association of psychology that we work with abnormal athletes. For this reason, most athletes resist working with a sports psychologist or mental coach because of the fear others will label them as a “head case.”
Even today, professional athletes I work with do not want the public to know they are working with a mental game coach. I certainly respect their concern for confidentiality, but it tells me that some athletes still think working with an expert in mental strength training should not be made public mostly because they do not understand what mental strength training is really about or are afraid of how the public views it.

Most athletes seek out my services because of a particular performance barrier, slump, plateau, or decrease in performance. As a mental strength coach, I often become the last resort after athletes have tried several other means to get beyond performance slumps. I wish this were not the case. Most athletes wait until they get into a slump or something needs to be “fixed” and they have exhausted all other resources before they commit to working on their mental game.

Only a limited number of athletes seek my services because they want to improve mental strength/toughness, with no apparent mental block, and improve performance. I find that coaches are more likely to bring in a mental coach to give the team every chance of being successful from the start of the season or pre-season. The real goal is to help a team identify barriers to teamwork and enhance performance by improving mental skills for success.

The real value of mental strength training is helping athletes reach their physical potential and perform more often in the zone. My work is not always about helping athlete get over mental blocks in performance. My goal when working with students is to develop a mindset for success so they can get the most out of their physical ability every time they step onto the field, court, track, or course.

**How Can Athletes Benefit From Mental Game Coaching?**

Mental strength training is about improving your attitude and mental game skills to help you perform your best by identifying limiting beliefs and embracing a healthier philosophy about your sport. Below is a list of the top ten ways that you can benefit from mental strength training:

1. **Improve focus and deal with distractions.** Many athletes have the ability to concentrate, but often their focus is displaced on the wrong areas such as when a batter thinks “I need to get a hit” while in the batter’s box, which is a result-oriented focus. Much of my instruction on focus deals with helping athlete to stay focused in the present moment and let go of results.

2. **Grow confidence in athletes who have doubts.** Doubt is the opposite of confidence. If you maintain many doubts prior to or during your performance, this indicates low self-confidence or at least you are sabotaging what confidence you had at the start of the competition. Confidence is what I call a core mental game skill because of its importance and relationship to other mental skills.

3. **Develop coping skills to deal with setbacks and errors.** Emotional control is a prerequisite to getting into the zone. Athletes with very high and strict expectations, have trouble dealing with minor errors that are a natural part of sports. It’s important to address these expectations and also help athletes stay composed under pressure and when they commit errors or become frustrated.

4. **Find the right zone of intensity for your sport.** I use intensity in a broad sense to identify the level of intensity or activation that is necessary for each person to perform his or her best. This will vary from person to person and from sport to sport. Feeling “up” and positively charged is critical, but not getting overly excited is also important. You have to find the balance between being excited to complete, yet not getting over-excited or anxious.

5. **Help teams develop communication skills and cohesion.** A major part of mental strength training and mental training is helping teams improve cohesion and communication. The more a team works as a unit, the better the results for all involved.

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6. To instill a **healthy belief system and identify irrational thoughts**. One of the areas I pride myself on is helping athlete identify ineffective beliefs and attitudes such as comfort zones and negative self-labels (i.e. “I’m a loser”) that hold them back from performing well. These unhealthy beliefs must be identified and replaced with a new way of thinking. Unhealthy or irrational beliefs will keep you stuck no matter how much you practice or hard you try.

7. **Improve or balance motivation for optimal performance.** It’s important to look at your level of motivation and just why you are motivated to play your sport. Some motivators are better in the long-term than others. Athletes who are extrinsically or externally motivated often play for the wrong reasons, such as the athlete who only participates in sports because of a a parent’s desire. I work with athlete to help them adopt a healthy level of motivation and be motivated for the right reasons.

8. **Develop confidence post-injury.** Some athletes find themselves fully prepared physically to get back into competition and practice, but mentally some scars remain. Injury can hurt confidence, generate doubt during competition, and cause a lack of focus. I help athletes mentally heal from injuries and deal with the fear of re-injury.

9. **To develop game-specific strategies and game plans.** All great coaches employ game plans, race strategies, and course management skills to help athletes mentally prepare for competition. This is an area beyond developing basic mental skills in which a mental coach helps athletes and teams. This is very important in sports such as golf, racing, and many team sports.

10. **To identify and enter the “zone” more often.** This incorporates everything I do in the mental side of sports. The overall aim is to help athletes enter the zone by developing foundational mental skills that can help athletes enter the zone more frequently. It’s impossible to play in the zone everyday, but you can set the conditions for it to happen more often.

Mental strength training may not be appropriate for every athlete. Not every person wants to “improve performance.” Mental strength training is probably not for recreational athletes who participate for the social component and to have a fun weekend. Moreover, if you do not spend time improving fitness or working with a coach, most likely you will not adhere to a mental strength coaching program.

Young athletes whose parents force them to see a sports psychologist are not good candidates either when the child does not understand or see the utility in mental strength coaching. It is very important that an athlete understand the importance of mental coaching and desires to improve his or her mental game without the motivation to satisfy a parent. Similarly, an athlete who sees a mental game expert only to satisfy a coach will not apply mental training.

Mental strength training does apply to a wide variety of serious athletes. Most of athletes (junior, high school, college, and professional athletes) are highly committed to excellence and seeing how far they can go in sports. They love competition and testing themselves against the best in their sport. They understand the importance of a positive attitude and mental toughness. These athletes want every possible advantage they can get including the mental edge over the competition.

Throughout this book we’ll look at the mental strength tools and how they will assist you in developing your mental strength skills.

We’ll make some suggestions and give guidance as to how you can develop your personal mental strength playbook.
Take your time and please performance any and all exercises in the book. Reading about mental strength does not produce mental strength! Doing the exercises and practice produces mental strength,

So, your first step in developing mental strength will be for you do to the exercises.

**Does Mental Strength Training Work?**

Researchers evaluating the effectiveness of mental strength training program come to the same conclusion: Mental strength training can improve performance across a wide variety of sports.

In fact, as many as 85% of the studies conducted to evaluate MST showed positive performance effects (Greespan & Felz 1989; Meyers, Whelan, & Murphy 1996; Vealey 1994; Weinberg & Comar 1994). In general, the consensus of sport psychology researchers, coaches and athletes is that mental strength training can enhance performance.

Mental strength training lends itself well to a philosophy aimed at athletes’ growth and development – physical, mental, social, moral and emotional. In fact, mental strength training is training in life skills like; how to set goals, how to handle pressure, how to handle criticism and how to stay focused on the task at hand.

These skills do enhance sport performance and they also improve performance in area of life – school music, theater or career.
Common Objections to Mental Strength Training

Myth 1 – Mental Strength Training Takes Too Much Time
Many athletes and coaches identify time constraints as the biggest restriction to implementing a mental strength training program. You may feel that you barely have time to develop and refine your athletic physical skills, let alone work on developing your mental skills.

Undoubtedly working on the mental game takes time. Devoting 15 to 20 minutes per day, several days per week is the most effective way of introducing new mental training tools. However, as little as 5 to 10 minutes a day can also be beneficial. A good way to implement mental strength training is to integrate with your practice training.

This way it doesn’t take any additional time and has another benefit, it enhances your practice quality. Developing an athlete's mental strength skill such as motivation, attention focus is the foundation for a high quality practice and peak performance.

Using the mental strength training tools such as goal setting, in imagery, self-talk, and energy management can help increase your practice quality. Rather than simply going through the motions, perform the practice activities with intensity and focused attention.

Myth 2 – Mental Strength Skills Are Innate
It’s easy to believe that mental strength is an innate characteristic that can’t be taught. You may believe that athletes are either blessed with strong mental skills, as part of their personality or genetic makeup, or have learned them through experience.

Either way, you may feel that there is little a person can do to improve one’s mental strength. That is a myth!

It’s true that we are all born with certain physical and psychological predispositions and mental skills are shaped and developed through the experience of everyday life. Being motivated, staying calm under pressure, and maintaining confidence in the face of adversity, are not simply innate qualities.

There are mental skills that great athletes have learned through experience or through mental strength training. Mental strength training is a more efficient way of developing new skills then waiting for the athlete to pick them up through the trial and error process of experience.

Myth 3 – Mental Strength Training Is Only For Psychological Problems
Many coaches and athletes believe only those with deep rooted psychological problems need to work on their mental game. Some athletes also perceive a stigma associated with “sports psychology”, thinking that those who need to work on their mental game are weak and have some sort of psychological problem that is going to be analyzed by a “shrink.”

Because of this, some athletes are reluctant to work on their own mental strength skills because they believe that they may be chastised and labeled as a head case. To the contrary, mental strength training can benefit all athletes. Many of the most talented athletes use some form of mental strength training, even as it is clear they do not have deep-rooted psychological problems.

Myth 4 – Mental Strength Training Provides a Quick Fix
Coaches and athletes recognize that physical skills take countless hours of practice to develop, but some expect mental strength skills to provide a quick fix. On occasion, coaches will ask a mental strength coach to talk to their team a few days before a big competition to get them mentally ready.
This reflects a major misconception about mental strength training, that is, just before competition is not the time to work on one’s mental game. Ideally, mental strength training begins in the off-season, or least at the beginning of the season.

Would you change your physical game plan just before competition? Absolutely not! That’s because you realize that after countless hours of practice your sport specific skills are automatically executed without conscious thought.

Introducing a new physical skill can cause you to start thinking about how to perform the skill and this will disrupt your performance. The same is true for mental skills training. It takes time and effort and is not a magical quick fix program.

**Myth 5 – Mental Strength Training Creates Performance Miracles**
Another myth surrounding mental strength training involves unrealistic expectations. Mental strength skills training will not help turn an average player into a superstar.

Some coaches and athletes feel that mental strength training will help athletes perform beyond the physical capabilities. In reality, mental strength training is designed to help athletes perform more consistently at or near their potential.

Similarly, some athletes and coaches expect incredible results from minimal effort. Athletes try a little relaxation training, imagery, and goal setting but quit after a few sessions because nothing miraculous has happened.

Would you expect to become superstars after a week or even a year of physical training? I don’t think so. You would expect to improve only after putting in the necessary time and effort. As with physical training, until mental strength skills training will help athletes perform at or near the performance capabilities only with consistent practice.

**Myth 6 – Mental Strength Training is for Elite Athletes Only**
Some coaches and athletes incorrectly believe that mental strength training can only help obtain peak performance of highly skilled competitors. As a result, they shy away from mental strength training; rationalizing that because they are not an “elite athlete” mental strength training is less important. It is true that mental strength becomes increasingly important and high levels of competition.

As athletes move up the competition ladder, they become more homogenous in terms of physical skills. In fact, and high levels of competition, all athletes have the physical skills to reach their peak performance. Consequently, any small difference in mental focus can play a huge role in determining performance outcomes.

We can anticipate that personal growth and performance will progress faster for young and developing athletes, were given mental strength training is utilized as opposed to an athlete not exposed to mental strength training.

In fact, the best time for introducing mental strength training maybe when athletes are just beginning their sport. Introducing mental strength training early in athlete’s career will lay the foundation to help them reach peak performance.
Mental Strength Tools, Techniques and Skills

Mental Strength Tools:
Mental strength tools are those 4 critical aspects of mental strength training that will develop the mental strength skills that will lead to peak performance.

- Goal Setting
- Visualization
- Self-talk
- Energy Awareness

Mental Strength Techniques:
Mental strength techniques are various ways that the tools are used to develop mental strength skills

- Sub Modality Manipulation
- Anchoring
- Strategies Restructuring
- Swish Pattern
- Belief Change
- Re-framing
- Association to Dissociation
- Dissociation to Association
- “As if”
- Presupposition Language
- Self-Hypnosis
- Meditation
- Chunking Up
- Chunking Down

Mental Strength Skills:
Mental strength skills are those qualities that are developed by using the mental strength tools and techniques that will lead to peak performance.

- Motivation
- Energy Management
- Attention Control
- Stress Management
- Self-confidence
- Trust
- Focus
- Team Cohesion
Examples of Using Mental Strength Tools to Develop Mental Strength Skills

Goal Setting

- Setting realistic and challenging short-term goals provides a sense of direction, thereby increasing motivation as reflected in increased effort and persistence.
- Challenging, realistic goals help athletes get into their optimal energy zone and direct that energy to the task at hand.
- Effective goals direct athletes’ attention to what they need to focus on to succeed.
- Although striving to win is important, focusing on winning can create excessive stress. When athletes perceive the challenge not as winning but as achieving their own realistically set performance goals, the challenge will always be near the athletes' present skill level and will create an optimal skill challenge balance.
- Consistent goal attainment raises self-confidence.

Visualization

- Teaching athletes to visualize themselves attaining their goals can help raise their motivation.
- By visualizing previous strong performances, athletes can identify the optimal energy levels and strategies for getting into an effective energy zone prior to performing.
- Using visualization effectively requires the ability to focus on desired images and dust can be used to develop attention skills.
- Visualization can be used to help athletes manage competitive stress. Athletes are less likely to experience elevated stress if they have imagined themselves dealing effectively with obstacles and unanticipated events that create stress.
- Visualizing oneself succeeding can raise self-confidence.

Energy Awareness

- Learning to energize when feeling flat, and developing the ability to relax when over-aroused can help build motivation.
- Relaxation energizing techniques can help athletes consistently enter and stay in their optimal energy zone, which is crucial to performing consistently at their peak.
- Being either over or under-aroused hurts athletes’ ability to direct their attention to the task at hand. Relaxation and energizing techniques help athletes improve their concentration skills.
- Learning to purposely relax when experiencing stress can help athletes manage their emotions. And energizing techniques can be used with athletes feel that low-level stress is preventing them from getting into their ideal mental state for performing.
- By learning to control their energy levels through relaxation and energizing, athletes will develop a sense of control which in turn enhances self-confidence.

Self-Talk

- Athletes can use self-talk to help motivate themselves.
- Self-talk can either raise or lower energy. Athletes can use effective self-talk strategies to reach their ideal mental state before competing.
- Focusing on task relevant keywords can help athletes focus their attention, or regain focus if they are momentarily distracted.
- Stress level is strongly influenced by athletes’ perceptions and interpretations of events that happened before and during competition. Athletes can use self-talk to develop a positive outlook on events that normally results in elevated stress.
- Positive self-talk can be used to raise self-confidence, or as negative self-talk can lower it.
Mindset for Success

Your mindset is simply a way of thinking that determines your behavior, your outlook and your mental attitude. For any given set of events – wins, losses, setbacks, and mistakes – the differentiating factor in how different you will respond to them and what meaning you put on them.

Your mindset is the middleman between the events that happen to you, your reactions to those events and what you do next time – it is the processor that determines how what goes in, comes out. Your mindset can help you to be successful in your sports performance or it can be the barrier to your success.

Developing a mindset that supports your athletic performance is ultimately the key to achieving and sustaining consistent peak performance.

Every behavior, thought, action and feeling is coming from within, so although the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes is essential, so along with this is the development of a winning mindset.

Your mindset is the foundation on which all of your athletic behaviors and skills are built up on and is the catalyst for your performance decisions.

Creating a mindset for success is based on a number of different factors. Many things come into play, such as beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, capabilities, environment, language and intent.

In this book you'll be exposed to and learn different techniques specifically around language and “internal representation” (what’s goes on in your head) which contribute or take away from creating a mindset for success.

Some key areas we're going to focus on are: The Five Principles of Success and The Seven Mental Strength Principles.

The 5 Principles of Success

The 5 steps for success consolidate what has been covered in creating a well formed outcome. This formula is not just for sales and can be applied to all areas of your life. Remember: it’s much easier to hit a target that is clearly defined and visible.

1. **Know Your Outcome**
   a. You need to know your outcome. We’ve briefly goal setting and this might seem obvious, but people have outcomes of “getting better.” That is not an outcome based on successful goal setting. So the first principle in success is to know your outcome.

2. **Take Action**
   a. While this might seem self evident, many people do not do this. They make up excuses, or give excellent reasons (side note: “reasons” are an indicator of limiting beliefs) of why sitting around and doing nothing or something apart from their goal is the right thing to do.

3. **Have Sensory Acuity**
   a. If you have the awareness to see, hear and feel what isn’t working, you can modify your behavior to steer you towards the desired outcome. It’s OK to be off course, as long as you are aware and make corrections.
4. **Have Behavioral Flexibility**
   a. If what you are doing isn’t working, anything else has a better chance of working, so change what you are doing. Many times we just stubbornly repeat the same thing, yet that has already proven not to work. The more flexible you are in your own behavior, the more you are controlling the situation you are in, and the better you become as a communicator and sales professional.

5. **Operate From a State of physiology Excellence**
   a. Operating from a totally resourceful state will empower you, and as states are quite contagious, it will also empower whoever you are with. If you are not feeling too hot, change that, by adopting a physiology of resourcefulness and firing off ‘anchors’ that make you feel good.

**Mental Strength Principles for Peak Performance**

1. **Act as If...**
   As you read the following principle ask yourself, “How would my life be different if I acted as if all these are true? And then act as if they are! By “acting as if” you are in more control of your experiences and manifestations.

2. **Cause v Effect:**
   For everything that happens in life there is a cause. This principle suggests that you take full responsibility for everything that happens in our life, the way you respond to it and the leanings from it...regardless if it IS done to you or not. When you blame someone or something else you surrender your power and ability to do something different, as it is up to “them” not you to change to event. When you are on the effect side you give up our personal power.

   - How would you act if you acted as if all your results were your responsibility?
   - How would you act if you acted as if you were 100 responsible for your outcomes?
   - How will your life be different by acting as if you are at cause for your effects?

3. **Results vs. Excuses:**
   In life you get one of two things – 1. The result we want or 2. The excuses for not getting them. The more focus and energy you give to creating your excuse the more you move away from creating what you want. Get rid of excuses and what you are left with are results...they may not be exactly what you wanted...but when you acknowledge that you did get a result, you can now take responsibly and create a different result.

   - How would I act and think if I believed and acted as if all you get are results and there is no room for excuses?

4. **Perception is Projection:**
   What you are thinking gets projected through your verbal and non verbal communications. For example, if you think the economy is bad you will find all the external “facts” to support that thinking. Also, if you think the economy is good you will find the “facts” to support that as well. You find what you “seek.” They’re an old expression, “give a dog a bad name and he’ll live up to”. It’s not that the dog is bad; it’s the observer that is finding all things that are bad with the dog...because of the label. This is probably one of the most important foundations to keep in mind as you move through the world.

   - How would think and act if acted as if everything you believed and your thoughts were projected into the “outside” world and manifested?
5. **Responsibility for Results:**
This says that if you want to achieve a goal that you must take 100% responsibility for your actions for getting that goal. By taking responsibility you are now in direct control of your results. The moment you give even 1% of your responsibility away to some one or something, you are now playing with chance instead of probability. You are responsible for the results you get; no one can create them for you. By acting as this is true you are giving yourself the best opportunity to get what you want.

- How would you think and act if acted as if you were 100% reasonable for your results?

6. **Excuses v Reasons:**
This says take any excuses you have for not having your goal or not going after it and making a reason why you must. For example, “I’m too old to start a business.” Change this to, “because I’m older then many, I will prove that I can start a business.” This helps move you from the effect side to the cause side.

- How would you think, talk and act if you acted as if everything you did was for a bigger reason?

7. **The Mind and Body Are Connected:**
This principle says that your thoughts will manifest in your body. If you think you’re tired, you’ll look and feel tired. If you have unsupportive thoughts about people, places and things, your body will reflect this in disease, lack of energy, aches, pains and ailments. By thinking supportive thoughts you will feel and look alive, alert and awake...joyous and enthusiastic...you will be filled with zeal and enthusiasm to do the things that aught to be done by you today!

- How would think and act if you acted as if every thought manifested in or on your physical body?
Laws of the Mind for Peak Performance

Law 1: What You Think Is What You Get
Any image placed into the subconscious mind develops into reality with absolute accuracy. Life is not determined by only outward acts or circumstances it is formed from the inside out. Each of us creates are own life with our thoughts. A single thought will neither make nor break your athletic career; a habit of thoughts will. You cannot think defeat and be victorious.

The subconscious mind responds only to mental images. It does not matter if the image is self-induced or from the external world. The mental image formed becomes the blueprint, and the subconscious mind uses every means at its disposal to carry out the plan. Worrying is the programming of the image you don’t want. The subconscious, not knowing the difference between a real or imagined image, acts to fulfill the imagined situation and “the thing I feared the most happens.”

Law 2: Every Thought Causes a Physical Reaction
Your thoughts affect all of the functions of your body. Worry thoughts trigger changes in the stomach that eventually lead to ulcers. Anger thoughts stimulate your adrenal gland and the increased adrenaline in the bloodstream causes many other physical changes. Anxiety and fear thoughts change your pulse rate. Hunger and thirst thoughts affect your stomach and salivary glands.

Your personal body chemistry is guided and triggered by your emotions. Thoughts lead the emotion. You can make yourself sick, poor, and unhappy by your habitual thinking.

Many people don’t realize that it is a law that you become what you dwell upon. The law of electricity must be obeyed before it can become man’s servant. When handled ignorantly, it becomes man set deadliest foe. This is the same for this law.

Law 3: Imagination is More Powerful Than Knowledge
Images are the property of the subconscious mind. Those images will always overpower what you think. Reason is easily overruled by imagination. In fact, an idea accompanied by a strong image usually cannot be modified through the use of reason. By subconscious reprogramming, however any idea can be easily and effortlessly remove, alter, or amended.

Law 4: Your Habits Are Your Life
Much of your day consists of successions of actions that have become more or less automatic. 98% of what you do, you do by habit, spontaneously. Each separate act, good or bad, plays a part in making you what you are.

Fortunately, it’s never too late, and you’re never too old, to change your habits. You can begin today. You can begin right now, at this very moment. Remember that success is a habit and failure is at. Repetition forms a positive habit as well as a negative one.

“Watch your thoughts, for they become words.
Watch your words, for they become actions.
Watch your actions, for they become habits.
Watch your habits, for they become character.
Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.”
Law 5: Negative Thoughts Breed Like Cockroaches
As you probably have learned through experience, the more attention and power you give to your fears, the more they affect you and the more likely they are to manifest themselves. If you continue to fear play poorly, consequently talk about your nerves, tension headaches and nervous stomach over time those organic changes will occur. Your nerves will act up, you get tension headaches, and you will experience stomach problems, all because you kept those negative notions in your mind.

This is true with any negative thoughts. The more you concentrate on missing a technique, the more likely you are to miss your technique.

In general, the more you allow fear and other negative thoughts to invade your life, the stronger their presence will become. And once they are firmly entrenched in your mind, your body will begin to create behaviors to support them.

Law 6: Attitude is a Matter of Choice
And attitude is basically the way in which you look at life or your performance. And as I’m sure you have experienced how your attitudes affect your body and how your body performs. Fortunately you all have the innate ability to choose your attitude in any given set of circumstances.

The events that occur in our lives are purely neutral. They are not positive until we have decided they are, and they are not negative until we have decided they are. You can decide to view of upcoming event as positive and challenging, while someone can choose to see the very same event as negative and confusing. Later in the book I’ll refer to reframing this is the ability to shift your perspective and, in turn, change our approach and probably change the outcome.

Law 7: Reactions Must be Managed
This law is the corollary to the previous one. Just as you can manage your attitude, you can manage your reactions. Again, what happens in your life is purely neutral. But how you react to what happens is not; it can affect your health and your performance.

For instance, if you miss a technique, you would have at least two options:

1 – Get upset and stay upset and let it affect the rest of your performance
2 – Release the event and get back in the game

The moment you miss a technique you have a decision to make, and that decision will start a chain reaction. If you succumb to your emotions and feelings of defeat, you will set yourself up to go in one direction, but if you can manage those feelings and set your sights on the bigger picture, you will go in a different direction.

Law 8: Thoughts Must be Kept Alive
No thought is self-sustaining in the mid, it must be nurtured, fed, and kept alive.

Only one idea can be entertained at one time.

This statement refers to how the conscious mind reorganizes an idea as true, correct, and guiding. And that he cannot hold the opposing ideas simultaneously. For example, an individual may believe in absolute honesty. He trains and expects his team-mated to be honest. Meanwhile, he cheats and his exams. He might rationalize this conduct by saying “everybody else does it at one time or another.” He cannot however, escape the conflict and its effect upon his nervous system that is caused by attempting to hold opposite ideas.

The following are truisms about your thoughts:

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• An idea, once excepted, tends to remain until it is replaced by another idea or until it is forgotten.
• Once an idea has been excepted, there is opposition to replace it with a new idea
• The longer an idea remains, the more opposition there is to replace it with a new idea.
• The longer an idea remains, the more it tends to become a fixed habit of thinking.
• Therefore, if you wish to change your actions, you must begin by changing our thoughts.

**Law 9: Attitude of Gratitude**
One of the laws of the universe is what you put forth comes back to you, and usually when it does it has gained massive momentum. In other words, what goes around - comes around. Therefore, if you develop an attitude of gratitude and you look at your life and sport career in terms of what you have to be grateful for, you’ll start seeing more to be grateful for, focusing on positive things, and more positive things will be attracted to you.
Part Two – The Mental Strength Playbook

Assessing Your Sports Mental Strength

Mental Strength is a quality which determines, in some part, how individuals perform when exposed to stressors, pressure and challenge.

It can play a significant role in determining how an individual manages stress as well as being a key factor in enabling individuals to perform to the peak of their abilities.

The first step in your mental strength training is to look inside and do a self-assessment of your mental game.

Let’s examine the signs that you may need mental strength coaching. Here is a list of the most frequent signs that athletes may be in need mental training:

1. You do not have well-defined goals or goal specificity. You lack direction.
2. You perform better in practice than during competition.
3. You are so self-conscious; you worry about what others think about your game.
4. You maintain many self-doubts about your sport before or during games.
5. You worry about letting others down by not performing up to others expectations.
6. You are too self-conscious and worried about how others may perceive you.
7. You suffer from anxiety, worry, or excess tension when in competition.
8. Pre-game jitters do not go away after the first few minutes into the competition.
9. You are motivated by fear of failure and it affects your performance in competition.
10. You have a fear of success and sabotage yourself when you are winning.
11. You are not sure why you play your sport or let others be your source of motivation.
12. You are motivated by external rewards, accolades, recognition, or praise.
13. You attach your self-worth to how well you perform in sports.
14. You lose focus or have mental lapses during critical times of the game.
15. Your routines are not well defined or lack mental focus in routine.
16. You go through the motions physically without mental focus or intensity.
17. You are not excited enough or are too excited to perform your best in competition.
18. You are distracted by things that go on around you in your environment.
19. You have doubts or negative thoughts before, during, or after competition.
20. Post-injury you cannot perform the way you did pre-injury even when 100% physically recovered.

21. When performing well you may sabotage your performance with a comfort zone (protect your lead) or expectations that limit your ability to press forward.

22. You become easily frustrated because of high expectations.

23. You cannot perform with freedom or trust in times of adversity or pressure.

24. You work on your mechanics or technique even when competing.

25. You do not concentrate in the here and now or focus only on execution.

26. You think of too much about consequences of your performance, good or bad.

27. You over analyze mistakes (technique) and thus think too much about technique.

28. You suffer from low self-confidence or self-esteem.

29. You limit your performance with negative self-labels such as "I am a choker."

30. You have trouble forgetting or letting go of bad past performances.

31. Your anger or frustration gets in the way of peak performance.

32. You are frequently disappointed with your performance and wish it was better.

33. You have a burning desire to be the best ever at your sport or just want to know how to improve your mental game.

Can you identify with any of the above statements? If so, an important first step in mental strength training is to identify the need to improve your mental game.

**What is Mental Strength?**

"Mental strength is... the capacity for an individual to deal effectively with stressors, pressures and challenges and perform to the best of their abilities irrespective of the circumstances in which they find themselves"

Mental strength is the quality which determines in some part how people deal with challenge, stressors and pressure.

There is a very strong link between Mental Strength issues like Stress Management and Peak Performance Development and behavior. These are all interrelated.

**Applications**

The sports world provided one of the two main origins for the development of mental strength (the other being health psychology and the concept of resilience which mental toughness embraces). In many ways mental strength is reasonably well understood by most coaches and trainers in most sports.
Various models of mental have operationalized the awareness of mental strength and its value in the sports world by creating an accessible definition in terms of the 4Cs and through the development of assessments.

- Challenge
- Commitment
- Control
- Confidence

The structure of assessment enables coaches, trainers and athletes to understand why they perform or don’t perform under the pressure of competition, when they know they can perform well away from that pressure.

Understanding mental strength also explains why some athletes are better suited to contact sports and why some perform better in team sports than in solitary sports.

Most importantly it helps to explain why an athlete of lesser ability can often beat (and often will beat) an athlete of greater ability. Described as winning mentality, mind-set, learned optimism, etc, these all describe the same or similar notion...Winner in their mind. That’s where losers lose too.

**Overall Mental Strength Assessment (WSQ-48)**

A mental strength assessment indicates the individual's capability to withstand a significant amount of pressure. Some of what an athlete will discover in the MSQ-48 is:

- If they have confidence in their abilities and are they often willing to take on demanding tasks, believing they will succeed.
- If they can usually shrug off criticism and not take others' comments to heart.
- If they are likely to speak their mind when working in groups and are usually comfortable in many different social and work contexts.
- Are they normally committed to the task in hand?
- Do they tend to be tenacious and resolute and likely to complete what they start?
- Can they deal with unforeseen circumstances without undue stress.
- When problems arise, are they likely or unlikely to give up, and typically view such events as challenges and opportunities for personal development, rather than threats to their security?
- Do they believe that they are in control of their life?
- Do they feel that they are responsible for their own destiny and that they are influential in their own environment?
- Do they tend to be in control of their emotions and can cope with difficult events.
- Are they are usually calm and stable under pressure.

**Challenge**

The Challenge indicates if the individual will be able to cope effectively with most of life's challenges, and may use these as away on enhancing their personal development. If they may at times seek "change for change sake", but are reasonably accepting of a degree of routine. If they will be most comfortable in an environment that provides them with a balance of predictability and flexibility, but they will usually be able to react quickly to the unexpected when necessary.

Occasionally some individual may take on more challenges than they can handle which might mean that they struggle to complete tasks assigned to them.
Suggest Mental Strength Coaching Tips:

- Helping the individual to review and priorities their work.
- Introducing simple time management tools and techniques.
- Supporting them in delegating their work to others.
- Encouraging the team to support the individual.

Commitment
The Commitment section indicates if the individual will usually complete his or her tasks even under difficult conditions, finding different ways to motivate him or herself. Also, if they have high levels of internal resources which allow them to sustain high levels of effort.

If they are resilient and tenacious. Once this person has begun a task they will usually see it through to the end, tending to go round, or occasionally through, obstacles that are blocking the achievement of their end goal.

There may be occasions where the high degree of focus may mean that others may be bruised by this individual’s commitment to achieve - particularly where weaknesses are ruthlessly criticized and strengths and achievements taken for granted.

While this behavior may be acceptable for the "crisis" assignment, sometimes these individuals do this for all assignments - and may acquire a reputation for being "hard". In this circumstance others will increasingly seek to avoid working with this individual because the experience is unpleasant.

Suggest Mental Strength Coaching Tips:

- Getting the individual to think about the strengths and weaknesses of the people around him or her and to plan to play to strengths - particularly where some have less energy and drive but will still contribute.
- Encouraging the individual to recognize those who have helped to achieve - and to give "praise".
- Reviewing the time, energy and effort being expended to achieve and get the individual to consider whether it is a productive use of resource.

Control
The Control section indicates if the individual will tend to feel in overall control of their lives and has a belief that they can make things happen. The overall control orientation can be split into two distinct areas: Life Control and Emotional Control.

Often, individuals will become frustrated – “knocking their heads against a brick wall” or they will simply react negatively to the obstruction.

Suggest Mental Strength Coaching Tips:

- Helping the individual to scope their work and the situation to understand why they are not achieving their goals.
- Re-direct and re-priorities their energy into potentially more rewarding areas.
- Carry out - with them - a force field exercise to identify blockages and then work on how to overcome them (possibly by going round the blockage instead of bulldozing through).
Confidence
The Confidence section indicates if the individual has high levels of self-confidence and is self-assured. Typically they are seen as high achievers and will often succeed where others will give up or fail - but they may "go for it" when this is not really warranted. They can be determined to try to succeed even when the task is unachievable.

Suggest Mental Strength Coaching Tips:

- Discussing programs and plans to ensure that these are properly scoped and assessed.
- Give clear parameters for unacceptable risks ("reduce costs but don't lose supplier X").
- Review their work regularly to reinforce learning.
- Check how someone is going to carry out a piece of work and whether he or she is comfortable taking it on. Don't just accept their word that they will do it - highly confident individuals will always say yes when asked to do something.

Personal SWOT Analysis - Making the Most of Your Talents and Opportunities

A SWOT assessment is more like an “inventory.”

SWOT stands for Strength, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats. From and athletic perspective you use this in two ways:

- Internal – Strengths and Weakness
- External – Threats and Opportunities

“Chance favors the prepared mind.” – Louis Pasteur

The SWOT Analysis (strengths, weakness, opportunities, threats) has been used in business settings for some time and it is a useful technique that helps in the area of “protection” as well.

What makes SWOT especially powerful is that, with a little thought, it can help you uncover opportunities that you would not otherwise have spotted. And by understanding your weaknesses, you can manage and eliminate threats that might otherwise present potential danger to you and others.

If you look at yourself using the SWOT framework, you can start to separate yourself and further develop the specialized talents and abilities you need to achieve success in the field of self-protection and the protection of others.

Below are some questions in each of the 4 areas SWOT. These are only a few to get you thinking. Use these to analyze yourself first in your training and then think of yourself in potential situations and use it again.

The benefit here is that you'll be able to examine certain scenarios calmly and then be able to practice them. The other is this process will create a thinking pattern or strategy that you can instantly utilize in a “live” situation.

Remember when you do this exercise everything is tied together. So at first some of the questions may not seem associated with self-protection or the protection of others. And when you begin to assess the influence the behaviors the question exposes you’ll understand how this aspect can affect your safety and the safety of others.
Internal - Strengths

Think about your strengths in relation to the people around you and your mental skills. For example, if you're a great at staying calm under pressure.

Consider this from your own perspective, and from the point of view of the people around you. And don't be modest or shy – be as objective as you can.

And if you have any difficulty with this, write down a list of your personal characteristics. Some of these will hopefully be strengths! Some things to consider are:

- What advantages do you have that others don't have (for example, skills, certifications, education, or connections)?
- What do you do better than anyone else?
- What personal resources can you access?
- What do other people see as your strengths?
- Which of your achievements are you most proud of?
- What values do you believe in that others fail to exhibit?
- What motivates you to learn?
- Adaptable to different roles
- Time management
- Good leadership skills
- Positive outlook
- Committed to achieving a given goal
- Pick up new sport skills easily

Internal - Weaknesses

Again, consider this from a personal/internal perspective and an external perspective. Do other people see weaknesses that you don't see? Do co-workers or teammates consistently outperform you in key areas? Be realistic – it's best to face any unpleasant truths as soon as possible. Some things to consider are:

- What tasks do you usually avoid because you don't feel confident doing them?
- What will the people around you see as your weaknesses?
- Are you completely confident in your education and sport specific skills? If not, where are you weakest?
- What are your negative work habits, i.e., are you often late, are you disorganized, do you have a short temper, or are you poor at handling stress?
- Do you have personality traits that hold you back on or off the field?
- Tendency to take on too many activities with little allowance for personal time
- Find it hard to accept criticism
- Can be too ambitious
- Find reflection difficult in learning
- Availability of time
- Need reassurance that I am performing a role well
- Find it difficult to be under the leadership of others

External - Opportunities
When assessing opportunities it is important to look at your strengths, and ask yourself whether these open up any opportunities – and look at your weaknesses, and ask yourself whether you could open up opportunities by eliminating those weaknesses. Some things to consider are:

- What new technology can help you? Or can you get help from others or from people?
- What opportunities are open to you?
- Do you have a network of strategic contacts to help you, or offer good advice?
- What trends do you see in your area of interest, and how can you take advantage of them?
- Where have you succeeded before?
- Are any of your competitors failing to do something important? If so, can you take advantage of their mistakes?
- What knowledge/experience can you take advantage of?
- How can you turn your strengths into opportunities?
- Seek out opportunities to gain education or qualifications in new areas
- Aim to maintain and improve current qualifications
- More playing opportunities

**External - Threats**

Performing this analysis will often provide key information – it can point out what needs to be done and put problems into perspective. Some things to consider are:

- What obstacles do you currently face that stand in the way of your training or career?
- What might de-motivate you or de-rail you taking action, or worse yet, cause you to freeze?
- What’s the day to day challenge?
- Do your weaker areas pose any additional threats?
- Who is your competition and how are they becoming successful?
- Is your sport changing?
- Does changing technology threaten your area of interest?
- Many other players in this position – competitive market.
- Changing focus of school sports – new sports introduced into curriculum i.e. boxing, aerobics, climbing etc

Again, these are just a few questions to help with self-examination. If the language used seems confusing, i.e. competition, change it to “teammate” or “assailant.” And again I would run through this exercise in looking at yourself in training and in the area if live conflict.

Do this on regular basis so that you will keep exposing all four areas and you can then work on honing your strengths and opportunities and diminishing your weakness and threats.

**Improving Your Mental Strength**

Mental Strength training is about improving your attitude and mental strength to help you perform your best by identifying limiting beliefs and embracing a healthier philosophy about your sport.

Below is a list of the top ten ways that mental strength training can boost your attitude and performance.
1. **Improve focus and deal with distractions.** Many athletes have the ability to concentrate, but often their focus is displaced on the wrong areas such as when a batter thinks "I need to get a hit" while in the batter's box, which is a result-oriented focus. Much of my instruction on focus deals with helping athlete to stay focused on the present moment and let go of results.

2. **Enhance confidence in athletes who have doubts.** Doubt is the opposite of confidence. If you maintain many doubts prior to or during your performance, this indicates low self-confidence or at least you are sabotaging what confidence you had at the start of the competition. Confidence is what I call a core mental game skill because of its importance and relationship to other mental skills.

3. **Develop coping skills to deal with setbacks and errors.** Emotional control is a prerequisite to getting into the zone. Athletes with very high and strict expectations, have trouble dealing with minor errors that are a natural part of sports. It is important to address these expectations and also help athletes stay composed under pressure and when they commit errors or become frustrated.

4. **Find the right zone of intensity for your sport.** I use intensity in a broad sense to identify the level of arousal or mental activation that is necessary for each person to perform his or her best. This will vary from person to person and from sport to sport. Feeling "up" and positively charged is critical, but not getting overly excited is also important. You have to tread a fine line between being excited to complete, but not getting over-excited.

5. **Help teams develop communication skills and cohesion.** A major part of sports psychology and mental training is helping teams improve cohesion and communication. The more a team works as a unit, the better the results for all involved.

6. **To instill a healthy belief system and identify irrational thoughts.** One of the areas I pride myself on is helping athlete identify ineffective beliefs and attitudes such as comfort zones and negative self-labels that hold them back from performing well. These core unhealthy beliefs must be identified and replaced with a new way of thinking. Unhealthy or irrational beliefs will keep you stuck no matter how much you practice or hard you try.

7. **Improve or balance motivation for optimal performance.** It is important to look at your level of motivation and just why you are motivated to play your sport. Some motivators are better in the long-term than others. Athletes who are extrinsically motivated often play for the wrong reasons, such as the athlete who only participates in sports because of a parent. I work with athlete to help them adopt a healthy level of motivation and be motivated for the right reasons.

8. **Develop confidence post-injury.** Some athletes find themselves fully prepared physically to get back into competition and practice, but mentally some scars remain. Injury can hurt confidence, generate doubt during competition, and cause a lack of focus. I help athletes mentally heal from injuries and deal with the fear of re-injury.

9. **To develop game-specific strategies and game plans.** All great coaches employ game plans, race strategies, and course management skills to help athletes mentally prepare for competition. This is an area beyond developing basic mental skills in which a mental coach helps athletes and teams. This is very important in sports such as golf, racing, and many team sports.
10. **To identify and enter the "zone" more often.** This incorporates everything I do in the mental side of sports. The overall aim is to help athletes enter the zone by developing foundational mental skills that can help athletes enter the zone more frequently. It is impossible to play in the zone everyday, but you can set the conditions for it to happen more often.

Most of athletes at a certain level are highly committed to excellence and seeing how far they can go in sports. They love competition and testing themselves against the best in their sport. They understand the importance of a positive attitude and mental toughness. These athletes want every possible advantage they can get including the mental edge over the competition.
Mental Strength Training for Athletic Success

The Confidence-Expectation Connection

Athletes that begin a personal coaching program usually do not understand the difference between confidence (a positive attribute) and expectation (a negative attribute), at least the way I define them.

However, if they coach with me, by the end of the first session, my athletes do understand. Most people think if you have high expectations, you also must have high confidence. The question I often get is: If I expect to win or expect to play well, doesn’t that mean that I am confident that I can win or play well?

The answer is a big “NO!”

Even the sports psychology literature mixes the terms confidence and expectation, which I think is wrong. I however, define these terms for my athletes so they can understand how expectation and confidence are interconnected – that expectations are not healthy for developing supreme levels of confidence.

Here is my conclusion: strict or high expectations can undermine and suck the life out of confidence.

Let me explain this reasoning.

First, some definitions are in order. Confidence is based on the strength of the belief in your ability or how strongly you think you can win.

Expectation, on the other hand, are judgments and demands that you place on your performance usually pertaining to outcomes or personal statistics such as the number of points scored in a game.

Confidence is simply a belief that precedes your performance such as when you see a good shot and feel like you will hit a good shot prior to execution. But confidence is void of strict expectations or the dire need to execute a good shot. In addition, a confident athlete does not judge the quality of the performance based on prior strict expectations, results or outcomes.

Thus, I define confidence and expectation to have different meanings; expectations are dire needs or demands that you place on yourself about the quality of your performance – sort of judgmental demands because you constantly judge the quality of your performance and outcomes based on prior expectations. They are typically focused on results or a standard you have for your performance.

Why are expectations so harmful to your confidence?

First, you set yourself up for a win/lose proposition. You either achieve your expectations or you fail to achieve your expectations. Second, if you don’t achieve your predetermined expectations, it’s easy to question your ability that day either during or after your performance. Essentially, you set yourself up for failure before you even start.

Many athlete’s who have experienced success at any level, naturally have very high expectations for their performance. I think expectations naturally develop from success. Athletes then think that an expectation-filled mindset for competition is the norm. After all, shouldn’t you expect great things from yourself?

Expect the best and demand high levels of performance. It sounds good.
Although this type of thinking sounds correct – it is not ideal because it sets you up for disappointment and frustration if you don’t execute on cue or achieve your expectations.

What makes expectations even more harmful is athletes elevate their expectations to an extent that prices in a level of perfection. For example, expecting to throw a no-hitter every game, expecting to hit perfect shots, or expecting to not make any errors in the hockey game are all examples of strict expectations that are unrealistic and almost impossible to achieve.

How many no-hitters did Nolan Ryan throw in his long, coveted career? Maybe a total of 6?

Ben Hogan, one of the best ball-strikers in the history of golf wrote that he only hit 3-4 shots just as he imagined in his mind during a round of golf and the rest of the shots were just good misses. And how many hockey games have you played when you made zero errors. So the more unrealistic or perfectionistic your expectations, the harder they are to achieve – usually impossible to achieve, then the easier it is to fall short and judge your performance as inadequate or less than perfect.

This type of thinking leads me to the conclusion that expectations are really harmful to confidence and the ideal scenario is to have high levels of confidence (based on past performance and training) without the judgmental behavior that comes with expectation.

Thus, part of my formulas for success is to develop high levels of confidence void of any expectations at all. To do this I help athletes replace expectations by setting manageable goals that are not based on judgmental behavior.

**Four Case Studies on Harmful Expectations**

To highlight the effects of high expectations on confidence and emotional control, I would like to share a few real-life case studies of students I have worked with from various sports.

1 - **NASCAR Driver Gets Frustrated**
A couple years ago, a top 10 NASCAR driver had a problem he was experiencing in the car. He said that when the race did not go according to his plan, he would become very agitated, frustrated, and lose confidence altogether.

His past success as a driver was actually working against him.

Why?

He had won races at every level of his career and his main goal was to win races and contend, and as time went on, his goals about winning turned into expectations about winning. He wanted to win So badly.

Having high expectations about his performance actually made him unravel when he did not reach his expectations.

When something went wrong with the equipment, such as a flat tire, this did not fit his expectations of winning or contending. And this is the danger of maintaining judgmental expectations.

An athlete will likely become upset, frustrated, and even lose confidence when he or she can’t meet the strict demands set for performance.
2 - Baseball Pitcher Loses Confidence
A college pitcher who maintained unrealistic expectations about his performance on the mound, the ball player was placing very high expectations on his pitching performance.

He wanted to throw a no-hitter every time he stepped on the mound. Throwing a no-hitter is equivalent to a perfect game in baseball – that is if you are the pitcher. A no-hitter is very hard to accomplish and rarely happens to even the best pitchers in baseball.

So what do you think happened when his chances of a no-hitter were quashed when someone from the opposing team got a hit off him?

That is right – he became upset and lost his composure for a few innings and by that time he would give up a few more hits!

3 - Golfer’s Perfectionism Leads to Low Confidence
Many of the golfers have perfectionistic tendencies. I have not discovered if these tendencies are because of the personality of golfers or the game itself makes for perfectionism (most likely a combination of both), but I also see this in many other sports too.

Anyway, one golfer had the expectation to hit perfect shots on the course. This is impossible in the game of golf. You can’t make a perfect swing every shot, hit the ball in the center of the club, have a perfect flight to the shot, and have it land next to the pit or right on the target on every shot.

The game of golf is about managing misses instead of hitting perfect shots. So this golfer essentially started the round with an unrealistic expectation to hit the ball perfectly every shot. When she hit her first bad or even marginal shot, she would start to question her swing mechanics and wonder if she would hit the ball well enough to score a low round that day.

This opened the gate for more mental errors.

She would start to analyze the mistake and try to fix it on the course, which led to making more bad swings. Soon she would be so distraught with her inability to hit perfect golf shots that she wanted to just get off the course and go work on her golf swing.

4 - Baseball Hitter’s Stats Get in the Way of At-Bat Focus
Do you ever go into a game thinking that you need to score at least 10 points in the basketball game, break 75 in the golf game, or create at least 3 assists each soccer game?

Statistics are important in sports, don’t get me wrong, and can be used to improve your performance, especially to help you modify practice time. But the problem is that too many of athletes have expectations about achieving their own statistical milestones.

There was an athlete who was way too concerned about his batting stats because he knew the scouts would be paying attention to his stats that year. He thought that getting signed with a good collegiate team depended on the quality of his statistics.

Thus he would go into each game focusing on his hitting stats with specific expectations for hitting, which caused him to focus on the results instead of the process. As you can see, expectations often cause you to judge yourself in a game based on your preconceived demands. When he did not reach the desired hitting performance he felt he needed to reach, his performance got even worse because he would question his hitting ability and lose confidence.
Presented about are four of many examples in sports about how expectations focused on results, desired statistics, and unrealistic demands can sabotage your performance and negatively affect your confidence, especially when you don’t achieve your judgmental expectations.

What is the Solution?

It might be obvious to you by now that I advocate a mindset void of expectations altogether. The formula for success is a set of basic mental strength skill that you must master. The formula includes the following:

- Athletes must perform with no expectation and replace strict expectations with high levels of confidence and manageable objectives (or process goals).

Many athletes find it difficult to perform without any result or performance expectations unless they have help and replace expectations (occupy their mind) with something more conducive to a process focus void of the judgments that come with expectations.

Many athletes apply a “formula” that I think is a recipe for disaster – high expectations and low confidence.

Do you expect perfection, but do not have the confidence to back it up?

It should be just the opposite – and this is often a revelation for some athletes, especially after they understand the definition of the terms in the above formula.

So, having high confidence and manageable objectives gives you a positive, process focus in place of judgmental strict expectations and specific outcome-orientated results.

The three steps in the formula are:

1. Identify strict, unrealistic expectations that affect your confidence negatively.
2. Understand how to harness the power of confidence and how confidence differs from expectations
3. Replace expectations with manageable objectives. Focus on manageable objectives or what I call mini-goals or process goals, but do not turn them into expectations.

Let’s take a closer look at these steps in the formula.

Step 1: Identify Your Own Limiting Expectations

This is the most difficult task for many athletes because expectations have become a natural part of their mental game and performance. When I talk about expectations, I refer to the strict demands you place on your performance. Instead of generating confidence, expectations become a desperate need for athletes – “I MUST finish in the top 10 this week, or the race is a failure.”

If you are familiar with my philosophy about mental strength coaching, you know that focusing on results is not the best mindset for peak performance.

Below are some signs to help identify strict expectations:

- Your “goals” focus on outcomes or results only.
- You constantly judge your performance based on personal standards.
- You become upset when you do not perform up to your own standards.
- You lose confidence when you do not achieve your personal standards.
You expect to attain certain game statistics during your performance.
On the occasion you perform up to your own standards, you feel no reward from this because you were “supposed to” perform that well.

Below are a few questions you can ask yourself to flush out any expectations:

- What results do you demand of yourself before the competition even starts?
- What personal statistics, such as points per game, do you feel you should achieve based on past performances, and would you be upset or frustrated if you did not reach these stats?
- Do you maintain unrealistic “goals” for your performance before competition? In which areas do you have to be perfect?
- Do you try to live up to other people’s expectations? What expectations do you adopt or take on from others – parents, coaches, or teammates?
- Do expectations about your scoring (or your team’s scoring) limit you when you exceed these expectations, keeping you stuck in a comfort zone?
- Do you generalize today about how you SHOULD perform based on past performances?
- Do you engage in name-calling with yourself or maintain negative personal descriptions such as “I’m a choker,” which influence your confidence?
- Are you easily frustrated when you don’t perform up to your minimum personal standards? What are the ways you think you should perform?
- Do you dwell and beat yourself up about how badly you performed?
- Do you have sudden temper tantrums over small errors during competition?

**Step 2: Perform with Confidence - not Expectation**

A priority for your mental game is to focus all your energy on the process, also called the present moment, instead of outcomes or results. Focusing on results only serves to set expectations on your performance. Process goals or what I call manageable objectives help you focus attention on execution only, if applied correctly.

The next step is to understand confidence and how this differs in its application to your performance. Confidence is a belief in your ability to execute a task at the most specific level. Confidence can also be the general belief in your ability to win or be successful. How does confidence differ from expectation?

- Confidence precedes your performance or execution.
- Confidence is not judgmental about how well or poorly you are performing.
- Confidence thrives on momentum and good performance.
- Confidence is focused on the present moment and your ability to execute instead of the desire for obtaining outcomes or final results.
- Confidence is rational and built from training and past performances, expectations are usually irrational and outcome focused.
- Expectations chase results, positive results lead to confidence.

**Step 3: Replace Expectations with Process Goals**

What are the steps for establishing process goals?

1. Decide which aspects of your performance you want to improve or focus on that day.
2. Set one or two process goals that will help you focus on execution.
3. If you recognize that you are getting ahead of yourself or thinking about results or focused on expectation, refocus on your process goals.
What are examples of process goals?

- Golf: Pick a specific target on every shot
- Tennis: Increase first serve percentage
- Hockey: Focus on quality back checking
- Football: Commit to the play call
- Swimming: Improve rhythm in the pool

I think you get the idea now. Process goals focus on the small tasks you need to do in the present moment that will help you perform well. The purpose of process goals is to help you become immersed in the present moment only and not really for the benefit of reaching small goals.

Do not evaluate or judge if you are achieving your process goals!

Although it’s rewarding to reach your goals, don’t assess or judge whether you’re on track because they will turn into expectations. If you do, you are not focused on the process. Later, after the competition ends, you can assess how well you did with your process goals. In other words, reflect and evaluate on your performance after game time not during the game.

Identifying Self-Limiting Expectations

The first step is to identify beliefs, ideas, and expectations that limit your attitude and performance.

These limiting beliefs are often mental "undercurrents" that can toe you under even with the best mental skills training. For example, if you see yourself as a "choker" in crunch time, you have to address this self-label before you can make substantial progress with confidence and focus under pressure because you will perform just as you see yourself.

Likewise, if you have issues with a comfort zone, this expectation will override your efforts in other areas because your performance is dictated by the underlying belief in what you judge as a good or a poor performance. You must do your best to identify these beliefs so you can address them head on. Next, I will discuss the categories of beliefs I find in athletics.

Four Basic Forms of Limiting Beliefs:

1 - Expectations:
Expectations are usually unhealthy and hold you back. You might have several expectations including the expectations to score a certain number of points, number of wins, or certain game statistics. The classic example is the golfer who limits his or her score with a comfort zone about what score he or she thinks is possible.

2 - Generalizations:
Generalizations are a category of expectation, but deserve a treatment of their own. Generalizations are ingrained beliefs that mold one’s behavior and mindset. Athletes set generalizations based on past performance(s) or experience(s). Based on one or two experiences, you generalize that the same event will happen repeatedly. This is called an over-generalization. An example of how a generalization works is a football team that believes it does not or cannot win when playing games in the snow because in the past has lost games played in the snow. Based on this notion, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and thus limits the team and player attitudes.

3 - Irrational Beliefs:
Irrational beliefs are ideas that are not grounded in reality and that just do not make good common sense. Although some beliefs seem rational and realistic to the athlete, if you challenge this belief, the
athlete can then see the belief as unhealthy, serving no purpose, or can acknowledge it as irrational. Many perfectionists maintain irrational beliefs that limit their success such as a baseball player who thinks he must throw a no-hitter every game and if he does not, views his performance as a failure.

4 - Negative Self-Labels:
Negative self-labels can be very unhealthy to a positive mindset in sports. Often they are very subtle and difficult to identify in athletes. What is a negative self-label? One of athletes, a motocross racer, identified himself as a "top 3" or "top 5" racer in the country (sounds pretty good right?).

However, what comes with this label is that he viewed himself behind the number 1 and 2 racers in the county. In a tight race, he would finish in 2nd or 3rd place right in line with his self-label even though he clocked the fastest lap times in races. Many golfers I have worked with label themselves as a streaky or poor putter, thus limiting their ability to grow confidence in this area of golf.

As you can see, the above negative label can easily sabotage a strong mental game and keep you or your team stuck. I call these core issues because they will mold a person's behavior and keep the athlete ingrained into poor thinking.

A crucial assignment for you is to examine your own expectations, based upon the above examples and do your best replace them with simple objectives that focus you on the process and in the here and now. In, my next tip I will give you more information on how to identify expectations.

Focusing on Manageable Objectives

The basic and most important principle in focus is that ability to focus on the process in the present moment, the “here and now.” However, it is not as easy as may be implied.

An offensive lineman, for example, has specific "cues" he must attend to during a down in football. Below is an example of a few attentional cues a lineman might focus on to stay grounded in the task of blocking:

- Assess the tendencies of defense in this situation
- Play Call
- Visualize or feel the play according to play called
- Recognize the front of the defense
- Anticipate slants, stunts and audible calls
- Positive self talk
- Rehearse the play
- Set up or stance
- Snap Count
- React to the snap

"Cues" are where you begin the zone focus training. Your first task is to identify what the important "focal cues" (also called, "task-relevant cues") are for your sport. These are the thoughts, images, feelings, targets, external stimuli, etc. that should fully occupy your mind during execution. Many coaches do not understand this basic principle and this is reflected when he/she doesn't tell you exactly what to cue in on.

For example, if a coach says: "Just concentrate harder, Tom!" He thinks you are not focused, but he doesn't tell you exactly what to cue on and when. It would be more helpful if he stated, "Tom, you're not reacting to the snap." Then, you would know that your cue is to focus on the snap, right? By providing more specific information, the more applicable the information is to refining focus.
When you focus on possible future outcomes, this is a concentration distraction to what's going on in the present play, shot, or routine. You cannot get into a zone focus when your mind is on the last play, shot, or routine.

You can use phrases such as: play one shot at a time, one pitch at a time, or one play at a time to help athletes stay in the here and now. Playing in the present is a very important key to achieving peak performance, but difficult for athletes to apply consistently.
Concentration Skills

Focusing on the Process in a Result-Oriented Society

How does this affect an athlete’s perception of the game and its purpose?

Perhaps even more to the point, how severely does this result-orientation affect players' strokes and ultimate enjoyment of the game?

With this result-system in place, is it a surprise that performance anxiety is perhaps the most commonly reported challenge facing competitive tennis players (and other athletes) today?

Players are so fixated on results, rankings and position on the team, it is impossible for them to reach their potential, let alone feel satisfied with their game. If winning and results are the focus, it is likely that players are suffering under this result-oriented system.

Attachment to results is an epidemic in our society. But let me be clear about this. As a “Type A” personality and athlete myself, I know the importance of producing results. There is a place for results in the game--during training, to improve motivation and establish goals, and for important feedback related to one's performance.

It also feels good to hit the ball in and win. Players feel like they are in control. There is nothing wrong with this desire. However, the problem is that we begin to attach to this feeling of control. Most players are taught that this feeling only comes when we win. Even more damaging, is when players connect their feelings about themselves to winning or losing. The point is that results alone are not a problem; it is what we attribute to winning and losing that get in the way.

All kinds of presenting problems develop out of a result-orientation: fear of failure, fear of success, tanking, performance anxiety, and distraction, loss of confidence and self-esteem, and overly high arousal.

In the final analysis, every challenge facing an athlete has some connection to a worry about outcome. The exciting aspect of this knowledge is that it creates an unbelievable opportunity for players to transcend their limitations and compete at an entirely new level--if they are willing to face the truth and address this problem.

Being aware of their tendency to focus on results and generating a new perspective in key situations can be life transforming in so many ways. The truth is that ultimately players have a choice--that is, how to approach each point, match, and pressure situation. This opportunity requires awareness, motivation to change and consistent mental discipline.

Unfortunately, this wide spread result-orientation has also infiltrated the junior circuit. Players often "duck" tournaments so they don’t damage their ranking. Players don't practice with one another for fear of giving too much of their game away. One can even find parents arguing about their children's rankings and seeding at tournaments.

The truth is that one can't escape it; nor can one expect players to reach their potential, to give the game a 100% effort because of the incredibly high stakes--failure. If players try and fail (get a lower ranking then they know they could have, lose, choke, etc.), they (and their parents!) can feel insecure and a sense of shame. For adolescents, this pressure to perform and meet such high expectations can be extremely threatening.
Exchanging the Result System for a Process System

Reading this you’re probably thinking, "How can one possibly get away from this result-oriented thinking. It's everywhere. And I hate to lose." The truth is that shifting from a result-system to a process-system can happen on the court at any given time.

It becomes an issue of distraction control--focusing on what really matters. However, depending on your early development and overall sense of self, it can also take time, a great deal of discipline and self-control. It depends on each athlete. Essentially, every point in a match presents players with a new opportunity to regroup and experiment with this new process-system--the enjoyment of hitting the ball, playing one shot and one point at a time, getting absorbed in the moment letting go of judgment, attachment and a need to control.

Most importantly, it means not caring about missing a shot, a willingness to hit out regardless of the outcome. I recommend the following steps in making this paradigm shift for tennis. You can apply these principles to any sport.

1. Monitor your level of focus and tension in competition for the next 2 weeks. Find your optimal levels (use a scale from 1-10. 1 being the lowest, 10 the highest).
2. Record, in a mental toughness notebook, your thoughts in matches, especially under pressure (i.e. have to win this match.
3. Make a decision before each match that you will go for your shots and play loose--no matter what and especially on big points. Make this a habit. Allow this to become more important than winning points.
4. Begin noticing how often results are mentioned at your club.
5. Start talking about what worked well in matches and what you want to work on--specifically. Saying that you want a bigger forehand isn't enough. Rather, say, "I will practice moving my feet closer to the ball with small steps so I can transfer my weight through the ball." This is process.
6. When someone asks you how you "did" in a match say, "I had a blast and played well." If you didn't play well say, "I enjoyed it, and I know what I need to work on." And if they are completely baffled tell them, "Oh, yeah we won (or lost)"

In the final analysis, all human beings have is perspective and free choice. If you exercise these mental muscles and train yourself to approach competition from the angle of "process" you will typically play better and enjoy it more.

As you let go and stop trying to control everything on the playing field you’ll, paradoxically, feel more relaxed and perform at a higher level, more consistently. In the next game allow the arm to swing freely through the ball and forget about the score. Get absorbed into the feeling of hitting the ball, moving the body fluidly across the court, and leave the worry and thoughts about results to the opponent. It will make all the difference--in life and on the court.

The Keys to a Present-Oriented Focus

There are four guidelines that will help you apply a process of focus and achieve a zone focus. Again, this may sound very basic and is easy to understand, however, it is much harder to consistently apply to practice and competition.

The Four-Step Focus Process

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1. Identify the cues that are relevant for successful execution for each task in your sport (e.g. tennis serve vs. return of serve). What do you need to focus on to achieve successful execution? What is not relevant to performing each task? (This will help you filter out the cues that will hinder your success).

2. Immerse yourself in the task-relevant cues you identified in number one. You have the power to selectively attend to what you want to and filter out those items, which are not relevant. (This is where preparatory routines, for self-paced tasks such as pitching, might come into play for some athletes. A routine will help guide you to become mentally absorbed in the task rather than the distractions during competition.)

3. Recognize when you are off-task, distracted, or out of your normal routine. This means reviewing your past performances to determine how and when your focus wanders or breaks down (e.g. external distraction, doubt, indecision, etc.). Be prepared to respond to this information by refocusing.

4. Create a strategy to help you refocus on the relevant cues of the task. This is the most important step in dealing with distractions and breakdowns in focus.

To summarize you want you to:

(1) Identify your outcome expectations and throw them away,
(2) Replace those expectations with manageable objectives that focus you on the process, and
(3) Immerse yourself into the objectives your established to be grounded in execution.

**How to Refocus When You Get off Task**

There is a simple three-step process to help you regain focus when off-task. You will not always play in the zone and focus 100% of the time. There will be times that you have to refocus such as when you start to think about who is watching you perform.

You already know that this is not relevant to execution and you have to find a way to get back on track.

This is where implementing the three R's come into play:

1. **Recognize**--you are off task and take action.
2. **Regroup**--tell yourself to stop and get ready to refocus.
3. **Refocus**--point your attention back to execution.

Here is how the Three R's work:

1. The first step to changing your focus is to RECOGNIZE you are thinking about or paying attention to something that is not relevant. For example, you recognize that you are thinking ahead about future outcomes ("What if they score on me and we lose?").

2. The next step is to interrupt yourself and take control. REGROUP by distracting yourself to stop focusing on irrelevant cues ("Stop thinking about the end of the game or if you win or lose! That won’t help you right now.").
3. The last and most important step is to REFOCUS on the task in front of you. You can do this by asking yourself this question: "What do I need to focus on RIGHT NOW to perform and execute my best?"

The goal of using the three R's is to help you refocus when your mind gets sidetracked.

It's OK to lose your focus momentarily, and this will happen to all athletes during a game, but smart players recognize when they are off task and quickly get back to playing in the here and now--the present moment. Next time you notice you are off-task; try the three R's for getting back on track.
Improve Your Self-Confidence

Self-Confidence is a Mindset

Confidence is a mindset, but it is based on tangible things such as your past success in sports. You probably derive your confidence from one or more of the following three sources:

1. From practice
2. From what other people say or do
3. From immediate past performance

I mention these sources of confidence because you absolutely have to tap into what makes your personal confidence clock tick. Most athletes will tell you that confidence comes from past success, playing well or positive experiences in their sport.

Confidence also varies depending on the task you are performing. You may be very confident in your shot-making skill in basketball, but less confident with your defensive play. In golf, a player can have a high level of confidence with his driver, a medium level with iron play and a low level with putting.

What is self-confidence?

Confidence is a belief in the strength of your ability to perform a task. It's a mindset that says, "I can do this." Confidence is not the same as self-esteem. Self-esteem is based on your assessment or appraisal of your person. You can approach a task with at least six levels of confidence:

1. I hope I can perform this task...
2. I Maybe I can perform this task...
3. I think I can perform this task...
4. I believe I can perform this task...
5. I know I can perform this task...
6. I will perform this task successfully...

The opposite of confidence is doubt, indecision, and negative thoughts. When you doubt your ability to perform well, you are not confident and vise versa. Sometimes you can't control the outcome of a competition, but you can control how you think and behave during the competition.

And this includes taking control of your confidence level and being proactive with your confidence. In the next few mental training sessions, we will discuss how to take control and be proactive with your confidence.

How to See Yourself as a Winner

To be fully confident you need to KNOW that you can and will perform well before you start the game or get into the match.
Confidence comes from a variety of sources. Once you think you have the ability to perform well in your sport, you are ahead in the game. This conviction is the foundation for building resilient self-confidence.

A young golfer named Frank Lickliter II before he earned a spot on the PGA Tour made a statement about his ability in golf. He said to me "I am built for playing professional golf" and that the lifestyle suited him well. Frank has had a very successful career on tour.

The first place to start in your confidence development is to realize that confident athletes see themselves as good athletes. Confident athletes have a positive self-image and grasp positive labels to describe their ability.

Boxing great Muhammad Ali was one of the best athletes in terms of creating an air of supremacy through positive self-labels about his performance and ability. He would say, "I am the greatest" and he believed it! He turned many people off because they interpreted his behavior as arrogant or too cocky.

You don't have to go as far as Ali and tell others how great of an athlete you are, but if you can hold the belief--that is what is most important--seeing yourself as a great athlete. Envisioning yourself as a great athlete is what separates the great from the good.

Write down three positive self-labels about your sport which you can truly believe. Examples:

- I'm a closer
- I'm the fastest
- I'm a great shooter
- or any label that helps you feel confident

**Take Charge of Your Self-Confidence**

Athletes are responsible for their own confidence prior to competition. However, some athletes wait until the competition is already underway to decide how confident they should feel. These athletes delay their confidence until they have seen positive results that indicate to them they are allowed to be confident.

Do not rely on positive results in competition and wait for your confidence to come around. Instead, be proactive with your confidence. Make a commitment to yourself to begin each competition with confidence and you will not have to wait until something good happens to feel confident.

Keep in mind that athletes gain confidence from years of practicing and competing, not just from most recent results in games, or their most recent successes. Using the feelings of confidence from past success can help you initiate confidence at the start of a competition. Return to those positive past performances at any time during your competition in order to maintain your confidence and boost your confidence when needed.

Here is a task to help you increase your confidence prior to competition. Recall the feelings and thoughts associated with confidence and try to take them with you into your next competition.
• First, go back and review the last time you played with confidence.

• Next, experience yourself reliving the event in which you had complete confidence. Did you feel unstoppable? Did you have momentum going into the game from past events?

• Then see or rehearse yourself in your next performance, playing with the same level of confidence and composure as before. This exercise will help you learn to visualize yourself performing with confidence and strive for success.

The Three C’s of Success

What do Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, Serena Williams and Alex Rodriguez all have in common? . . . CONFIDENCE, tons of it! Self-confidence is THE NUMBER ONE ASSET that separates great athletes from mediocre ones. Confidence is so important that you just can’t play without it. If every athlete possessed self-confidence, nobody would need mental strength training and this book wouldn’t be written. Most athletes who seek mental strength training or coaching do so because they lack confidence, have a “fragile” level of confidence, or they have fallen into a slump they can’t get out of.

What is the one thing to help athletes perform their best?

Confidence. It is important for every athlete; however, understanding how each player develops and loses confidence is the most relevant approach to building confidence. Good players possess confidence and they are not afraid to display it. Additionally, they remain confident even in times of adversity.

That brings to mind the children’s story, “The Little Engine that Could™”, a Platt & Munk Classic by Watty Piper. The story is about a little engine that is challenged to pull a train up a mountain. Nobody thought the little engine could accomplish the task; however, the little engine was filled with confidence. While trudging up the mountain he continually repeated the words, “I think I can…”™. As the little engine topped the hill and started down the other side, he repeated the words, “I thought I could…” The amazing character in this story achieved success because of tremendous self-confidence and a burning desire to accomplish the task. In the face of adversity, regardless of the opinions of others, the engine remained confident.

Performing well every day requires what I call the three C's:

• Confidence
• Concentration
• Composure

You probably use these words from time to time in your sport because they are important, but do you really know how to develop and harness the power of the three C's? This section will help you understand self-confidence; how it grows and slumps; and how you can stay on top of the confidence roller coaster to improve your game.

My definition of self-confidence is how strongly you believe in your ability to execute a physical skill or perform a task. That’s right, how strongly YOU believe in your ability.

Many people allow the perceptions of others to inhibit and tear down their self-confidence. Confidence is derived from a baseline of past performances, practice and preparation. A beginning tennis player has little or no confidence in his ability to execute a service in tennis. With practice, he becomes competent in the skill to service the ball.
With competency or skill mastery confidence becomes evident. You can also derive confidence simply from the belief that you are physically talented, which mirrors the definition of confidence.

Muhammad Ali, given name Cassius Clay, began taking boxing lessons as a child. At an early age, he won the national Golden Gloves Middleweight Championship twice and the AAU national light heavyweight title. He later earned a gold medal in the Olympic light-heavyweight division and moved on to become the three-time World Heavyweight Champion. Ali is often referred to as “the self” proclaimed greatest of all time because of his fully-exhibited, unwavering confidence. In the face of adversity, fighting against astounding athletes in the professional boxing arena, Ali experienced sixty-one bouts and won fifty-six; thirty-seven by knockout.

There are two different types of confidence. One is the general belief in your ability as an athlete, the feeling that you can win or perform well. The other is the specific belief in your ability to nail a three-pointer, hit a good shot or score a goal.

The two forms of confidence are equally important and they influence each other. Some people develop a high level of:

- Practice self-confidence which comes from working hard to develop skill in their game; however, these same athletes don’t always transfer that confidence to the competitive arena; therefore, they lack competitive self-confidence.

- Competitive self-confidence. This form of confidence is critical to success in competition. It seems odd that an athlete gains overwhelming self-confidence through practice, but is unable to maintain that confidence in competition.

**How to Improve Your Self-Confidence...Even when the Chips are Down Include:**

1. Realization of what confidence is and is not
2. Discussions of where it comes from and how you lose it
3. Identification of the effects on self-confidence that are within your control
4. Recognition of doubts that sabotage your confidence
5. Development of the ability to counteract those doubts
6. Introduction of specific mental strength strategies you can implement to boost your confidence

**Taking Control of Confidence**

It is important to realize that your confidence level is fed by others and can be crushed by them just as easily. In light of this knowledge, you can develop self-confidence that is solely yours.

Once you have gained solid and true self-confidence; that cannot be taken from you; not by opinions, not by occurrences, not by difficult challenges, not even by failure.

Michael Jordan finished his career with the best career average in NBA history in regard to points. Michael Jordan is an avid athlete who was named NBA Most Valuable Player on numerous occasions and earned a number of honors throughout his career. In addition to being an NBA superstar, he is an inspiration to athletes of all ages. Jordan possesses the self-confidence that is critical to mastering a sport.

**Confidence and Momentum**

Without confidence you have doubt, indecision and fear. When filled with doubt, indecision and fear, you have no momentum.
Confidence is simply the feeling or belief that you can perform well. Generally it is based on the notion that you have performed well repeatedly in the past and you can do it again now.

Momentum may be the most important mental strength weapon to excel or win in any sport. So, you may be asking, “So, what is momentum and where can I get some?” Momentum is close kin to confidence. It begins with the confidence gained from a series of plays, shots or successful routines.

Momentum is like a confidence track record. “I’ve performed well for the last few minutes; no reason for it to stop now; I’m on a roll; it’s MY day!”

The exhilarating feeling of momentum can hit you fast, but it can leave just as quickly, taking your confidence with it. One minute, you may be running with a bounce in your step after making an interception. After the next series, you may find yourself walking with your head down after the receiver beats you and the opponent scores.

Momentum is psychological, but it begins with the last pep talk, play, shot or good performance during the last few minutes. Making one great play in football, performing one good routine in gymnastics, or sinking a long putt in golf can result in a ride on the wave of momentum.

Confidence is not doubt, indecision or hesitation. Athletes that have doubts about their sport before or during performance do not have total confidence. These doubts can be embedded in subtle or not so subtle questions you maintain about your performance such as “can I play my best against this team or opponent?” If you question your ability, you have disguised doubt.

Indecision is another form of hidden doubt. If you can’t decide on a plan, then you are unsure. If you are unsure, you have some doubts in your mind about the plan.

Over the years, I have found that confidence is both person-specific and task-specific. Each person derives confidence from different sources. Basically there are three sources from which athletes glean confidence:

1. From practice
2. From what other people say or do
3. From immediate past performance

You absolutely have to tap into what makes your personal confidence clock tick. Most athletes will tell you that confidence comes from past success, playing well or positive experiences in their sport.

Confidence is also task-specific. You may be very confident in your shot-making skill in basketball, but less confident with your defensive play. This implies that levels can range from zero confidence to extreme confidence and this theory applies to all sports and the individual tasks performed within your sport.

In golf, a player can have a high level of confidence with his driver, a medium level with iron play and a low level with putting. Athletes in all sports can experience this same dilemma. Recognize that there are at least six levels of confidence:

1. I hope I can hit this shot . . .
2. Maybe I can hit this shot . . .
3. I think I can hit this shot . . .
4. I believe I can hit this shot . . .
5. I know I can hit this shot . . .
6. I will hit this shot . . .
This may sound like a matter of semantics, but it depicts the idea of how confidence varies from “I hope” or “I wish” to “I believe.”

Confidence and self-esteem are often used interchangeably, but in reality, they are two significantly different concepts. Please don't confuse them. Confidence is the strength in your belief to perform a task. It is related to the task or physical ability. “I can out race all the other racers today.”

On the other hand, self-esteem is an appraisal that you make about yourself, specifically, your self-concept. It has nothing to do with the belief in your ability to perform. Self-esteem asks the question: “Do you like yourself?” Self-esteem is based on your assessment or appraisal of your person.

Before becoming a Hollywood hit and Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger was an award-winning body builder. As a teen, he aspired to become the world’s best-built man and by early adulthood, he achieved that goal. During his body-building career, he earned numerous titles in various countries including Mr. Europe, Mr. Universe, Mr. International, Mr. World and Mr. Olympia.

As stated earlier, athletes develop confidence in many different ways. A major source of confidence is successfully executing a skill repeatedly in practice or in competition. Simply put, if you have achieved success, you think you can do it again; therefore, past experience and prior success is critical to a foundation of confidence.

Confidence can also grow from seeing others perform a skill and thinking you can do the same. Arnold Schwarzenegger had an idol, Reg Park, and as a teen he trained with former Mr. Austria, Kurt Marnul.

Coaches use verbal persuasion to convince athletes they can perform. Other sources from which an athlete can derive confidence include:

- Supportive people
- Practice and repetition
- Performing well in practice
- Good coaching
- Having a supportive —team
- Proper equipment
- Fitness
- Diet
- Mental preparation
- Mental strength
- Feeling prepared
- Doing the right things off the field, course, track or court

One of your primary goals should be to tap into the sources of confidence that are at your disposal and those that most affect your conviction that you can achieve success in your performance.

**Your Worst Enemy**

As an athlete, you glean confidence from many different sources; however, you can also sabotage yourself, blocking your ability to develop a greater level of confidence. Self-limitation is the reason that many athletes don’t play with greater confidence. Doubt, irrational beliefs and unrealistic demands that you may unknowingly harbor can disrupt your own self-confidence and growth.

**Doubts about Your Ability**

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Self-doubt is the number one saboteur of self-confidence for athletes. Self-doubt and self-confidence are opposites. If you have doubt, “I’m not sure if I can pull off the win today”; or you are questioning your ability, “Do I really have what it takes to win the match?” confidence is low or absent.

As an athlete, sometimes doubt becomes such a normal part of your thinking that you don’t realize how much you are stifling your own success. One mental strength skill is the ability to identify the beliefs that interfere with your success. As you read further, think about this, just how many of your daily thoughts in regard to your sport are focused on success, reaching your goals and playing well?

How much time do you spend thinking up excuses for playing poorly, doubting your ability to execute or criticizing part of your game?

**Unhealthy Beliefs**

Unrealistic or irrational thinking is an area that requires close attention. Some of these beliefs are often subtle, irrational or unrealistic. “If I don't were my white golf shoes today, I will not play well.”

Following are four categories of unhealthy beliefs that can negatively impact your self-confidence:

1. Expectations that limit success
2. Over-generalizations that limit success
3. Irrational or unrealistic beliefs that limit success
4. Negative self-labels that limit success

**Expectations** are at the root of self-destruction in sports. Most athletes think that high expectations help them perform better because by holding themselves to high standards they become confident. From my experience, this is not the case.

Your goal should be to have confidence without expectations. The classic expectation is the comfort zones. A comfort zone is an expectation about how you think you should perform based on past performances. Some athletes have a strict range of what is acceptable for their performance. “I usually make 6-8 points in a game.”

When this type of person does not perform up to par to meet this strict expectation, he or she gets frustrated and starts to question why he or she can’t do what was easy to do in the past. Likewise, when the player is performing better than expected and has 8 points in the first half, this does not match what he thinks he is capable of and thus the player is inclined to play more tentatively or in this case, to shoot less.

Translation—he does not have the confidence that he can score 12-14 points for the game because it does not match what he thinks is possible. This expectation is based on past performance and can significantly thwart improved performance and growth.

**Generalizations** are another type of belief that is closely tied to expectations. False generalizations are based on one or more negative past experiences.

For example, if your team played poorly against a rival team the last two years, the generalization is “we always play poorly against this team.” This leads to the false assumption that it will be hard to beat the rivals and thus a lowered level of confidence ensues. These generalizations can lower your expectations resulting in poor performance.

**Irrational** beliefs come in many forms. One common irrational belief is “all or nothing” thinking, which is how athletes assess their performance. With this belief, athletes view their performance as
either good or bad with no middle ground. The tendency is to put average or even above average performances in the less than desired category, which leads to a lower level of confidence.

Viewing a performance that is less than perfect or ideal as a poor performance can block confidence development.

Think of a golfer that has made unhealthy associations between his behaviors on the golf course and the quality of his performance. For example, he started to associate the manner in which he folded his golf glove (after taking it off post shot) with the quality of his performance.

Children are often given something that gives them a sense of security. For example, if a child is having nightmares, a parent may give them a dream-catcher telling them that it will catch the bad dreams. Sometimes that works to instill comfort; however, when the child begins to think they can't sleep without the dream-catcher, it becomes an unhealthy, irrational belief.

An athlete may have a good luck token that they believe improves their performance. If they leave their token on the bus and think they can't perform well without it; that is an unhealthy and irrational belief that can crush confidence and kill performance.

Negative self-labels are also destructive to confidence. Negative self-labels eat at the core of a person's self-image as an athlete and can seriously daunt self-confidence. Self-labels are hard to shake.

Athletes who lack confidence maintain negative labels such as “I'm a choker,” “I’m too small to be good,” or “I'm a wimp.” A common self-label in golf, for example, is “I have the yips in putting” or “I am a yipper.” A golfer who bears this belief is stuck on the idea that he is not a good putter.

Some golfers even come to think they have a putting disease. It is very difficult to develop any confidence when you entertain negative self-labels. Developing confidence in the presence of negative labels is like a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde syndrome. You have the desire to be the best, but a little voice keeps telling you that you have limitations. Once you get rid of the baggage and annihilate the negative labels, your confidence level can reach heights you never imagined possible.

Perfectionist Behavior and Ideology
Perfectionists often stifle their confidence because they place unrealistic demands on themselves. Perfectionists, either consciously or subconsciously, set very strict expectations for performance. When they don't achieve their desired results, they become frustrated and their confidence level sinks.

Extremely high expectations can make you feel like a failure regardless of how well you do. A college pitcher who expected to throw a no-hitter every game he pitches is setting himself up for failure. Throwing a no-hitter is a very difficult task in baseball and happens very rarely.

Nolan Ryan, one of the most intimidating pitchers in baseball, pitched for more years than any player in major league history and threw only seven no-hitters during his career. When this player would throw a pitch and the batter got a hit, he would become extremely frustrated because he expected to throw and no-hitter and this “failure” crushed him mentally.

In his mind, the game was “over” because his “perfect” game was lost.

Following are behaviors that perfectionists engage in that are detrimental to the mission of improving self-confidence:

- Setting unrealistically high expectations
- Dwelling on shortcomings
• Fretting over past mistakes
• Self-criticizing
• Over-analyzing performance
• Viewing performance as good or bad with no middle ground
• Fearing failure
• Measuring self-esteem based on sport-related success

All of the above self-limiting beliefs directly or indirectly jeopardize the development of self-confidence and also affect your self-esteem. Identifying and dealing with your unhealthy beliefs is a vital component of the confidence enhancement package.

The Confident Athlete
You can take control of your own confidence level by being proactive and accepting responsibility for your thoughts and beliefs. Some athletes are talented physically and gain a lot of confidence based on their talent. Others are not as fortunate and must work toward developing both their confidence and their physical skills.

Confident Athletes Maintain a High-Belief in their Physical Skills
Confidence comes from a variety of sources. Once you think you have the ability to perform well in your sport, you are ahead in the game. This conviction is the foundation for building resilient self-confidence. You wouldn't be participating in your sport if you didn’t have the physical skills to compete.

Confidence Booster:
• What are the best aspects of your game or performance?
• What have other complimented you about?
• Imagine someone complimenting you on your work ethic, method or skill; now imagine yourself taking that compliment as if it were genuine.
• How would you describe your skills to others if you took the most positive stance possible?
• Build yourself a resume highlighting all of your positive attributes or skills in your sport. Pretend you will present this to a coach you are — selling yourself to.

Confident Athletes See Themselves as Winners
Confident athletes have a positive self-image and grasp positive labels to describe their ability. Envision yourself as a great athlete this is what separates the great from the good.

Confidence Booster:
• Write down three positive self-labels about your sport which you can truly believe. Examples: “I’m a closer” or “I’m the fastest”.
• Post these self-descriptions in a notebook, on a mirror or on your desktop where you will see them often.
• Strive to identify and discard any negative labels that others have given to you or that you have made up yourself; write them on a piece of paper.
• Now tear up the paper with the negative labels on it and throw it away. Symbolically, they are no longer a part of your life.
• When speaking to others about yourself and your abilities, use the positive self-labels you have formulated with confidence; avoid arrogance

Confident Athletes Focus on Why They Will Succeed
You always have choices to make prior to any competition. Confident athletes choose to focus their thoughts on things that help them feel confident. Other athletes choose to focus on doubt and the preparation of ready-made excuses in case they fail.

Great athletes enter competition thinking about why they deserve to win and they feel confident. The belief in their skill, work ethic in practice and the ability to prepare mentally and physically for competition gives them the confident edge.

You have the choice in what you focus on prior to and during any event. You can choose to think about how good the opposing team is or choose to focus on why your team will win the game. There are basically two choices: the choice to focus on failure or the choice to focus on success.

Confidence Booster:

• Write yourself a letter describing the reasons why you deserve to be confident and why you should excel in your sport. Do not be humble...this exercise will help you to step outside of your normal critical self and engage with your strengths. Your reasons should come from sources of confidence previously identified.

• Prior to competing, review the reasons you have developed and focus on them before games.

The following depicts the fun you can have with this exercise. It was developed by an amateur skydiver to enhance his mental strength aspects of competitive skydiving.

A skydiver’s reasons to be confident:

1. People at my last tunnel camp said they were going to use the videotape of my performance to study.
2. The instructor at the last camp had a hard time coming up with challenging drills for me.
3. A friend said she scored the “gravy train” when I was in her group.
4. My instructor expressed his appreciation for having me fill in on the tunnel camp.
5. My amateur team nearly won the creeper meet against the pros.
6. One of the instructors constantly tries to get me on his dives.
7. My skills are way greater than the average skydiver in the state.
8. During my last tunnel trip, I flew with two guys who I used to think were incredible skydivers, I now can out fly them.
9. I scored a 9+ point average at the last meet.
10. My team scored 8 on our first weekend out.
11. People always look to me to plan other jumps.
12. I have most of my mind maps or jumps memorized.
13. People constantly comment about the positive energy I have while jumping.
14. In one camp, I was placed with a couple of pessimistic people in an effort to cheer them up.
15. A couple of weeks ago three people were endeavoring to position themselves across from me because my communication is so outstanding.
16. My eye contact is so good I caught a teammate out a couple times during the last tunnel camp.
17. I made it through a whole tunnel camp without getting flipped over.
18. I can stay nearly on level with someone under or over me.
19. I hit the reset button after a mistake very well.
20. I fish others out of trouble well.
21. At my hometown, they’ve taken up a betting pool to when I’ll be joining a professional skydiving team.
22. I’ve had coaching from the start, so I have no bad habits to break.
23. Our team leader recruited me as _very experienced_ on a dive.
24. My outside center exits are better than most (I’ve seen pros bobble them worse than me).
25. The camp leader chuckled: having me was _almost like having two coaches_.
26. I rarely brain lock or get distracted on my jumps.
27. My slow fall is excellent; I came close to challenging the pros.
28. My fall rate range is great.
29. My turns are fast and accurate.

Confident Athletes Use Positive Self-Talk

Every person carries on an internal dialogue, which is referred to as “self-talk”. Your self-talk can be positive. “I will run well today”, or negative, “I hope I don’t embarrass myself and finish dead last today.”

The easiest time to identify your negative self-talk is after making a mistake. Some athletes have positive self-talk and pick their selves up after a mistake, while other athletes beat up on themselves for not performing up to expectations. “You stink; you should find another sport to play.”

The ideal goal for an athlete is to maintain positive self-talk before, during AND after performance.

Confidence Booster:
- Think back to the last time you performed your best and were in the zone.
- What was your self-talk like?
- Develop a list of positive statements from your best performance such as “You are the best setter.”
- Write these statements on a piece of paper.
- Experience yourself in your next event using these positive statements often.

When you are in the heat of the battle, no one is going to help you to feel confident. You must be self-reliant and bolster your own confidence.

Confident Athletes Don’t Let Doubts Rule

Doubt is what deteriorates confidence; it is what is left in the absence of confidence. Pessimistic, perfectionistic and over motivated athletes tend to hold on tight to doubts, which if unchecked can ruin an athlete’s mindset and derail performance.

Some athletes start doubting before they even start the competition or make an error; however, most athletes struggle with doubts after making a mistake or performing poorly in competition. After only one bad shot early in the round, many golfers begin to doubt their ability to hit a golf shot.

This feeling of doubt remains with them for the rest of the day. The first step in overcoming doubt is to become aware of the thoughts that deteriorate confidence. The next step is to counter the doubts with thoughts that will lead to better outcomes.

Confidence Booster:
- To become aware of your own doubts in times of adversity, pick one or two doubts that you experience when your performance is not going well or after you make a mistake.
- Phrase the doubt as if you are thinking out loud: “I’ve missed two shots early. I will struggle with my shots the rest of the game.”
- Now, refute or counter the doubt statement: “Missing early does not mean I will continue to miss. My chances are only getting better that I will make the next one.”
- Refuting the Critic Within - Doubt Statement Counter Statement “I struggle when I play on the road.” “Stay positive. It’s the same game, only a different arena.”

Confident Athletes are Proactive

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Some athletes don't take full responsibility for their own confidence prior to competition, they unknowingly wait until the game starts before they make a judgment about how confident they should feel.

These athletes need to see positive results to indicate that they deserve to be confident. Don’t allow your confidence to wait for a positive event before kicking into action. Confidence comes from years of practice and repetition, not just the last race, game or period you performed. You have plenty of past successes to draw upon before the competition begins.

**Confidence Booster:**
- Prior to a competition, go back and review the last time you played with confidence.
- Experience yourself reliving the event in which you had complete confidence.
- Did you feel unstoppable?
- Did you have momentum going into the game from past events?

The goal is to recall the feelings and thoughts associated with confidence and project them in the next competition. Visualize yourself in your next event performing with high levels of confidence. You may even want to write a “confidence script” detailing how you felt and performed. Record your script on tape and play it for yourself the night before and the day of the competition.

**Confident Athletes Think, Feel and Project Confidence**
Complete confidence is evident when you are thinking, feeling and projecting confidence. Your actions have to be in sync with your thoughts and feelings. Imagine it is your turn up to bat; you walk up to the plate with your shoulders slumped and head down, you don’t feel or look confident.

Not only is your body language reinforcing poor self-confidence, but the pitcher picks up on your behavior, his confidence level skyrockets because he knows that he has you!

Confident athletes are not afraid to think and project confidence. Too many athletes actually stifle their own confidence because they have been taught to act humble and not to look “arrogant” or “cocky.” This attitude can hold athletes back from thinking and feeling confident or having a true inner confidence.

**Confidence Booster:**
- Choose on athlete in your sport that you admire, one who you think projects a ton of confidence.
- Can you emulate his or her confidence?
- Can you project the same feeling of confidence?

Using a role model to pattern your own confidence after is helpful for athletes who have difficulty projecting a healthy level of confidence.

**Confident Athletes Use the Past to Feel Confident Now**
The real foundation of confidence comes from performing well repeatedly. Past success is what gives you the belief that you can do it today.

Nothing can prevent you from drawing on past success as a confidence booster for the current competition. Recalling a good performance or an effective practice is one option. You can also recall a specific event like the perfect routine or flawless jump to help boost confidence in the present. The central thought here is: “I've paid my dues; I deserve to perform well today.”

**Confidence Booster:**
• The next time you compete, try using an event in the past to help you feel confident.
• Before the competition, recall an event in which you performed well, then select a specific task such as a beam routine in gymnastics.
• Rehearse the feeling of confidence you had before or after the routine in which you performed well and tell yourself you can do it again.

Confident Athletes Anticipate Success
The saying: “You must first ‘see’ it before you can achieve it” certainly applies to sports. Great athletes have the ability to anticipate and focus on success. They believe they can win. They think they are the best. They visualize performing well and winning.

Hall of Fame baseball star Hank Aaron hit 755 career homeruns. He attributed much of his success in hitting to the ability to visualize and mentally prepare himself to be successful against pitchers he would face each game.

He called it “game preparation.” His preparation involved finding out who would pitch, studying the pitcher, anticipating what type of pitches he would see in the next game and visualizing himself hitting well. Many successful athletes use this same approach to mentally prepare for upcoming competition.

Confidence Booster:
• Imagine and feel yourself being successful.
• Select an opponent you will compete against, or a course, track or alley you will play on in your next competition.
• Mentally rehearse, visualize and/or experience, yourself playing well against that opponent or playing well on that course, track or alley.

Revisit this exercise shortly before the competition and take note of the effect it has on your self-confidence and your performance.

Confident Athletes Prepare Strategies or Game Plans
The best athletes do not leave confidence up to chance. They study their opponents so they feel ready to play well against the competition.

Long distance runners will taper off their training before an event in order to feel fresh and ready for the endurance challenges. Most teams develop game plans for how they want to approach an opponent.

Football teams, for example, set up a series of plays they think will work well against the upcoming defensive team. Athletes from individual sports set game plans or strategies for playing a golf course, beating a tennis opponent and racing the fastest on a certain track. A game plan or strategy helps to define your mission when it's time to compete. The feeling of preparedness can incredibly heighten your confidence.

Confidence Booster:
• What are some game plans or strategies you have used in the past to play well against a certain opponent, to beat the golf course, to race well on the track or to do your best in a performance?
• What has worked in the past that helped you take control of your confidence going into the game or race?
A racecar driver might develop a specific race plan for running on the next track. This plan may include the lines to take for each turn, when to throttle-down and break into turns and guidelines for a passing situation. You can do the same for your sport.

My suggestion to you is: Keep your game plan focused on the process of performing well; playing one play at a time, hitting one shot at a time or playing one pitch at a time. Focused play eliminates distractions that can cause you to lose momentum.

“My thoughts before a big race are usually pretty simple. I tell myself: Get out of the blocks, run your race, stay relaxed. If you run your race, you’ll win…Channel your energy. Focus.” ~ Carl Lewis

Carl Lewis is an Olympic track star with 22 gold medals, 3 silver medals and 3 bronze medals to his credit. During his career he held 18 national titles, collected more than 200 victories and was nominated Athlete of the Century by IAAF. Remaining focused obviously contributed to Lewis’s history making career in his sport.

**Confident Athletes Anticipate Challenges and Prepare to Feel Confident**

Do you become rattled by unanticipated events that happen during competition? Confident athletes do not lose composure when faced with uncertain challenges in competition.

You must anticipate as many challenges as possible based on what has happened in the past. Some regular and unusual challenges to anticipate may include difficult weather conditions, unfair officiating, rude spectators, psych-out attempts from competitors, poor play, bad luck, unexpected equipment problems and any other distractions you may encounter.

Being prepared mentally to cope with any distraction or challenge, rather than viewing them as inhibiting obstacles, is very important to ensuring your confidence in the upcoming event. The final step is to develop a “coping strategy” that helps you meet any of these challenges; overcome the barriers. How will you react to distracting events in a way that helps you play on with focus, confidence and composure?

In addition to anticipating challenges and developing coping responses for uncertain challenges, you should prepare for your game to feel confident. Part of this means practicing the relevant skills in your game that you will need in competition.

If you are going to play against a serve and volley player in the next tennis match, your practice should reflect this style of play. Gaining confidence in your ability to play a serve and volley player is the goal of your practice and preparation. Preparing your confidence also encompasses developing a game plan, feeling fresh and ready to compete and avoiding over-training at the last moment.

**Confidence Booster:**

- Think back to when you got sidetracked by unanticipated distractions during competition.
- Prepare a written list of these distractions.
- Record the situation, the distraction and your reaction to the event.
- Formulate and write down a coping response you could use to react more appropriately in case the same distraction presents itself in the future.

For example, maybe poor weather is a distraction for you. First, how can you prepare for playing in poor weather? Second, what is the best thought to have if the weather turns poor? Your response may be that you tell yourself you can perform in any weather conditions and you are not going to let the conditions distract you from focusing on your game plan and the task at hand.
Some teams practice in conditions that allow them to be prepared for poor weather. For instance, if a football team or a runner anticipates rainy weather for a game or meet, they may practice on a wet field or track. This type of practice can prepare them to cope, knowing that they can perform even in the unfavorable conditions.

If the competitors haven’t experienced such conditions during practice, those athletes who have are a step ahead in the competition.

“How you respond to the challenge in the second half will determine what you become after the game, whether you are a winner or a loser.” ~ Lou Holtz

Lou Holtz is often referred to as “one of football’s most successful coaches” and the phrase is well deserved. In college football, Holtz took four different programs to top 20 finishes, won a national championship, National Coach of the Year honors and effectively guided teams to 22 postseason bowl games. He has become the first coach in the history of the NCAA to lead six different programs to bowl games and subsequently, the only coach to guide four different programs into final top 20 ratings.

Confident Athletes Have Patience

Patience is closely linked to confidence. Patience is the ingredient most needed when you hit the wall of adversity. Impatience occurs when an athlete is not playing up to his or her own expectations. A lack of confidence breeds impatience. Webster's defines patient as “steadfast despite opposition, difficulty or adversity.”

In sports, I translate steadfast to confidence; so being patient in sports is having confidence in ability despite opposition, difficulty or adversity.

Athletes who maintain patience remain confident knowing that their performance, although not on track right now, will take a turn for the better. Patience is a form of confidence about the future that things will get better or improve with time if you wait for it.

Confidence Booster:

- Using the anticipation and cope model as before, list the top five situations in sports that cause you to lose your patience.
- What is the corresponding thought for each situation that leads you to become frustrated or to throw in the towel?
- Now develop a system to cope with adversity so you can maintain your confidence.

Assume you are hitting the ball close to the hole all day, but have not made a putt. Your patience is wearing thin. The impatient golfer says, “I can’t buy a putt today—it’s just one of those days. I stink at putting. I hate this game!” These thoughts breed impatience.

The goal is to turn the statement into one that breeds confidence and patience. The patient golfer in the same scenario may say, “Keep giving yourself chances to make putts, they will fall sooner or later. I might make everything on the last few holes. Hang in there!”

Can you see how these two different ways of looking at the same event lead to different emotional outcomes and levels of confidence? The key is to anticipate your tendency when challenged and have a prepared response ready to put into play.

“My motto was always to keep swinging. Whether I was in a slump or feeling badly or having trouble off field, the only thing to do was keep swinging.” ~ Hank Aaron
Confident Athletes Don’t Pay Attention to the Critics

The mark of a truly confident athlete is the ability to hold on to the dream and rise above the critics. Critics may say you are not good enough, fast enough or talented enough to excel in your sport.

Realize that a critic's job is to criticize and your job is to prove them wrong. This is a constant challenge for rising stars who are reminded often of the small percentage of athletes who make it to the top of their sport.

Dick Fosbury is one of many examples of athletes who remained steadfast in spite of opposition. Fosbury was a young high-jumper in the 1960s. The standard high-jumping technique, called the straddle, was difficult for Fosbury, so he innovatively developed and mastered his own technique which was somewhat of a modified scissor-kick in which he went over the bar backwards and horizontal to the ground.

This technique later became known as the “Fosbury Flop”. People repeatedly told him that his technique wouldn't work and his peers thought it was unorthodox and ineffective. In the face of the criticism, he shrugged it off and remained committed to developing his technique which won him an Olympic Gold Medal at the 1968 Mexico City Games.

Since then, the “Fosbury Flop” has become a standard technique for high-jumpers all over the world and today, almost every high-jumper uses this technique.

Confidence Booster:

• Instead of blindly adopting the beliefs of your critics, use their criticism as a way to motivate yourself to achieve bigger and better things.

Some athletes simply ignore the people who say they can't do it because the critic's voices don't match the belief they have in their own abilities. Others use the nay-Sayers as a form of motivation. “I'll show him that he's wrong about my talents!”

“I remember when I was in college, people told me I couldn't play in the NBA. There’s always somebody saying you can’t do it, and those people have to be ignored.” ~ Bill Cartwright

Bill Cartwright played in the NBA for fifteen years, six of those with the Chicago Bulls. After retiring from the court, he served as an assistant coach with the Bulls for six seasons. Both as a player and as an assistant coach, Cartwright directly contributed to five NBA World Championships for the Bulls. In 2001, Cartwright was named head coach for the team. It seems that ignoring the critics is a great tactic for developing the sports career of your dreams!

Wrap-up

Confidence should naturally develop as you practice your sport and move through the stages of motor learning. Unfortunately, we maintain doubts and expectations that sabotage our own confidence along the road to developing better performance and firm self-confidence. This is the reason I spend so much time with athletes on identifying self-beliefs, expectations and labels that oppose the development of confidence.

When you are riding a wave of confidence and momentum, your performance is effortless and fun at the same time. You don’t need to make adjustments or counter doubts with prepared statements. This is the time to go with the flow.

Participating in sports is not always as easy and fun as some people believe. To be a good athlete, you need to work on building your confidence every day. The only person who is truly going to help you
feel confident is yourself. You can't depend on other people or even your coach to instill confidence in you.

The best task you can accomplish is to look inside and examine how you are deflating the natural development of your own confidence as you practice and mature in your sport.

Remember, you are both your best friend and your worst enemy. I will end this presentation with a self-evaluation which follows. Good luck in identifying your self-created barriers and knocking them down one at a time so you can have the confidence to transform yourself from an average athlete to a fabulous one!

**Sports Confidence Rating**

Respond to the following statements using a scale of 1-10, 1 being never and ten being always. Write the number (1-10) that best describes your situation next to the statement. For the most useful results, be as honest as possible.

1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10
Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

- I become frustrated when I do not perform up to my expectations.
- I have called myself a — loser, — choker or — wimp when I failed or performed poorly.
- I doubt my own abilities during crunch time.
- Either I play good or bad there is no in-between for me.
- My last performance dictates how well I will play the next game.
- I internalize goofy names that others give me such as — bench sitter.
- When I talk about my sport, I use negative labels or descriptors to describe myself.
- I don't perform well in big games or matches, based on my past performances.
- I lose confidence easily after my first mistake or two.
- The team I play against or my opponent affects my confidence level.

**Overall Rating**

**Scoring:**
- If you scored 10-35, you can maintain a healthy level of confidence.
- If you scored 36-70, you may have some doubts that limit your performance.
- If you scored 71-100, you have several limiting doubts that are holding you back.
Improve Composure & Emotional Control

Growing From Adversity: How to Stay Confident After failure

Do you beat yourself up, become upset, and lose confidence after a poor performance? You are not alone – many athletes, as many as 75%, are tough on themselves after a defeat or a loss. Sometimes I think this is born out of human nature – wanting to perform as well as you can each time you compete.

But you and I know the reality is that you can’t be in the zone every time you compete. In this chapter, we’re going learn the strategies to grow from failure, and stay confident under adversity or when challenged by failure.

There’s a high school basketball player, who struggles with his game when he is not hitting his shots. If he misses early in the game, he gets upset with himself and starts to think that something is wrong with his shot. This causes him to play defensively and not risk taking shots, he instead passes the ball off to his teammates….sound familiar?

You have many opportunities for success in sports via practice and games. However, there are many opportunities for failure as well. How many golfers win a golf tournament?

One out of 144!

How many tennis players win the tennis tournament?

Only one!

And when you go head to head with another team, there can only be one winner.

The old adage in life is that you wouldn’t appreciate the mountains if it weren’t for the valleys. And, in sports, this is also true. If you won every tournament, championship or game, how challenging would the sport be for you?

Would you lose interest?

Of course you would!

That’s why it is important to remember that in order for you to learn and continue to grow as an athlete (and even as a person) you can’t win every time and need to grow from defeat.

But still, many athletes hate to lose and not be the best every time that they are in play. This mindset can be both an asset and a detriment, depending on how it is used.

Competitiveness is a quality that all champion athlete’s posses, they simply hate to lose or love to win and this drives them to succeed. However, a strong competitive drive can work against some athletes because even with the smallest of failures or setbacks, they lose confidence, become frustrated with themselves, and lose motivation.

Growing your confidence by learning from failure seems like a contradiction. Some of athletes may argue that nothing good can come from making mistakes, losing a game, or failing. In reality, however, the best lessons are often learned in light of a tragedy, no matter how big or how small.
I want you to remember this:

**There is no failure, only feedback.**

Take the example of when a baby learns to walk for the first time; she did not succeed all at once. A lot of trial and errors went into learning to walk. Before walking, she likely learned to crawl to gain good hand-eye coordination skills.

Then, she began to pull herself up to a standing position to gain strength. And, from there she may have learned to “walk” by balancing herself with furniture or other stable objects until she could learn to balance all by herself. But even with all of the practice, babies still try to walk and fall down, many times before they take their first group of consecutive set of steps.

This process of trying to walk and falling down leads to learning and allows the baby to make adjustments so eventually she can walk confidently without falling down as frequently.

“...life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up.”

Thomas Edison

I know this is simple illustration of how learning from failure or mistakes occurs, but it is relevant.

Athletes who respond to adversity in a healthy way will grow faster than those using the setback to lose confidence and motivation.

If your first response to adversity is to become upset, berate yourself, and lose confidence, it makes it harder for you to grow as an athlete!

**Negative Emotions and Judgmental Behavior**

Some emotions are effective and very useful for sports such as excitement, intensity, happiness and other positive emotions. However, they are many emotions that are not effective such as frustration and anger about your performance.

With mistakes, failure, and adversity, some negative emotions will occur and are natural. But often these emotions can cause you to stay stuck in a past performance and/or undermine your future confidence.

**Top Five Destructive Mindsets From Perceived Failure:**

1. **Frustration** – you become so frustrated with losing or not winning frequently that you are constantly upset.

2. **Anger** – you become angry with yourself or others for your lack of perfect performance.

3. **Loss of confidence** – you feel like you never can perform up to your expectations and thus begin to doubt yourself.

4. **Trying too hard** – you decide that you just need to try harder or work harder and this can backfire. This can backfire because trying harder can make it so you play tense and don’t trust your natural talent, which leads to a new set of mental obstacles.

5. **Giving up all together** – you reach a state or learned helplessness and feel like no matter how hard you try to what you do, you will repeatedly fail.

**Learning from Errors**

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No one wants to make errors. It would be great to throw a no-hitter; go 4 for 4 at-bat; score a bogey-free round of golf; or throw zero interceptions in a game with five touchdown passes. But the reality is that these performances are far and few between.

Think about it, even the very best professional athletes make mistakes. Mistakes are what being human is about! Yes, you want to strive for the “perfect” game or performance, do so with the understanding that mistakes are not just going to happen; they are an entirely natural part of sports.

Some of the more perfectionistic athletes have a hard time accepting this fact. They set out to have the perfect game or performance and when they don’t achieve this, they become easily upset and frustrated. This can snowball as you know into other issues such as losing confidence, motivation, intensity; or giving up altogether.

Two mental changes need to take place if you want to learn how to overcome your struggle with errors:

1. Learn to be more accepting of the fact that you will make some errors and this is a part of sports, and part of being human.
2. Learn how to process the error so you don’t dwell on it, lose confidence and/or become frustrated and have it affect your performance.

To learn to be more accepting that you will likely make some errors, you need to let go of the impulse to have a perfect performance and know that you can still perform well, contribute to your team, and win the game!

This is hard for perfectionists to swallow, but you have to come to grips with the fact that you will make errors. I want to make it clear, I don’t want you to expect that you will make errors, but I do want you to refine your mind to be being more accepting of yourself in competition.

One trick you can use to be more accepting of mistakes that are bound to happen is to give yourself three “get-out-of-jail cards” before for each competition. Use one of these cards after each error, thereby giving yourself the opportunity to make a couple errors or mistakes during a game without putting undue stress on your confidence, composure and performance. The purpose of this is so you can play on with confident and composed mindset after an error or two.

As for learning how to process errors better so you can remain composed and in control, this often comes down to not expecting to make zero errors – translation: don’t expect to be perfect.

The negative emotion of frustration you feel after mistakes is not healthy, as you know. Frustration is often a result of dwelling on the past and thinking over and over again about how the error happened and how awful it is that you committed this error.

The sooner you can let go of the past and stop dwelling, the faster you can compose yourself and play on with confidence. This means forgiving yourself when you do make mistakes and understand that mistakes are a natural part of sports.

This leads to learning from errors. Some people would argue that you can’t learn from errors, but I disagree. You make a mental note of the error so you can analyze it and address it after your performance when cooler heads prevail. Errors give you a clue to what you need to work on in practice to improve your performance. They happen for a reason – and most of the time it’s because the errors you committed are a weaker part of your game...the “feedback”
If you double faulted three critical times during the match and were broken often while serving, this indicates that you may need to work more to improve your service game. You may be able to analyze it even more and determine exactly what you have to do to improve your service game.

Is it placement? Is it velocity? Is it poor accuracy? Was it an error in concentration or another mental error? The errors that you make often indicate what you need to address in practice and this is what good coaches do to improve their team’s future performance.

Again, there is no failure, only feedback.

**Steps to Accepting “Feedback”**

1. Give yourself the luxury of getting feedback, i.e. making errors, in sports prior to competition
2. Flush out your perfectionistic or strict expectations about your performance that if you don’t match, you become upset.
3. When an feedback (error) happens, please don’t dwell on it – focus on the next shot, play, or pitch as quickly as possible.
4. Save the feedback (error) for after the game to analyze it objectively when you are in a calm state of mind.

**Growing from Setbacks or Failure**

You have two methods to react to any situation. The first option is to get upset, frustrated, and angry that you lost the match or did not perform up to your ability and carry these negative feelings with you for hours after competition.

This choice, clearly not the best option, causes you to lose confidence and possibly even lose motivation for practice and training. The second reaction method is to react with confidence and composure by focusing on what you are doing well with your game and trying to reframe the situation by finding the silver lining hidden in it. This option, the better choice, leads to composure, confidence, and the ability to assess your performance objectively.

**Two Wolves - A Cherokee Parable**

An old Cherokee chief was teaching his grandson about life...

"A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy. "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves.

"One is evil - he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, self-doubt, and ego.

"The other is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.

"This same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old chief simply replied, "The one you feed."

You will have plenty of opportunities to be critical of yourself or your team’s performance if you choose to use negative emotions to guide your performance. But, if you recognize and accept that you will never be perfect or have a flawless performance you will always have the chance to analyze what you did wrong to learn and grow from the mistakes you made.
"If you don’t have confidence in yourself then I think it is very difficult to perform. Anyone who has ever sat in a racing car or worked in the world of motor racing knows that it is not always about the highs. I think you’ve got to realize when you do have lows that you are good enough to come out the other side of them." ~ Andrew Kirkaldy, Race Car Driver

Some analysis of your flaws is necessary – so you can improve your weaknesses and grow, but it does not mean you have to pick apart your confidence and feel dejected for hours (or days, months, and even years) after competition.

Being self-critical of your performance is not the best reaction to failure or defeat. Assessing your performance objectively is a better reaction that leads to growth confidence. Many fine athletes lose confidence or motivation and even quit sports because they are too critical or judgmental of their performance.

Golfers are notorious for assessing every shot of the round after play, picking apart the round, and beating themselves up over the short putts they missed or the errors that led to dropped shots. This happens even when a golfer hits 90% of his shots well!

Golfers quickly forget about all the good shots and dwell, instead, on what went wrong.

Does this seem rational to you?

I think part of this self-critical behavior is human nature – wanting better from our performance.

However, a lot of this behavior is self-judgmental and self-condemnation.

So, how do you learn from failure without emphasizing mistakes or being overly accepting of them?

First, cool down immediately after the game or match. When emotions are elevated, it’s easier for you to beat yourself up when you still feel frustrated or upset. I suggest that you take 20 minutes to relax, get a drink, hang out with your friends or family or find something that will temporarily distract you from your negative emotions.

The very next step for you is to think about what you did well during your performance. Maybe you didn’t win, but I’m sure you can think of something positive that you can reward yourself for even if you lost. Some examples of performances worthy of a reward would be: making an interception, sinking a long putt, or battling back to win the second set of the match.

Parents and coaches also need to direct positive comments first before jumping in right away to offer constructive criticism such as, “you really served well today or great hustle out there today.”

I suggest to sports parents that they comment on two things athletes did well before jumping in with any constructive criticism and then finish with one more the athlete did well. And if you are a sports parent you should not question your young athlete, such as “Why did you double fault in the third set?” This puts the athlete on the defensive and feeling like they need to justify an error and causes him or her to focus on errors.

You certainly don’t want to punish your athlete for performing poorly or losing. But parents can do this in subtle ways by withdrawing their support or not talking to their child after a loss. My suggestion is to remain neutral with your reactions weather your child has won or lost, try to behave the same way after a game in either case. This way you don’t push your child by withholding support or communication.
Some athletes wrongly attach their self-esteem to their success or failure in sports. When they do not perform well or lose a game, they make an assumption that they are not as worthy a person and should feel bad about themselves as a whole. Do not make any assumptions about the person you are based on how successful you are in sports!

Finally, leave your performance on the playing field. Switch roles from athlete to student (if you are a coach) or athlete to son or daughter (if you are a parent). You do not have to take the loss home with you. You can go on living your life and doing other activities you enjoy. Remember, sports should be enjoyable, not so stressful that they hinder finding joy in other aspects of life.

A Case Study in Perseverance
Learning from failure sometimes isn’t easy, but it can make you a better athlete. Speed skater, Dan Jansen found this out in his bid to win an Olympic medal during the 1988 and 1994 games.

At the Calgary Olympics in 1988, Dan was expected to win two medals in the 500m and the 1000m speed skating events. On the day of his 500m bid he learned that his sister, who was suffering from leukemia, was losing her battle to stay alive and just hours before his race he learned that his sister had passed away. Going into that race his mind was not focused on getting the job done, and early on in the race he fell and was put out of contention.

In his second attempt at a gold medal in the 1000 meters Dan was setting a world record pace at the 600 meter mark and on his way to gold. At the 800 meter mark Dan took an unexpected fall and was again, for the second time, out of contention. As a result Dan went home empty handed with no medal in either of the events he was expected to win.

For an Olympic athlete bouncing back from failure is a four-year process. Olympics do not come around every week like a football game – these athletes have to wait a long four years for redemption. Dan knew that failing to win the gold this time around meant that his next shot would be in four years, and even at that, there still was no guaranteed that he would make the Olympic cut.

In the Lillihammer Olympics in 1994, Dan was again on the team and challenging for a medal in the 500 and 1000m events. In his first race the 500m, again he was leading going into the final turn. However, in that final turn he fell along with a number of other skaters. Another setback he had to live with in his career!

Most athletes in Dan’s situation would have felt destined to fail. Never winning a gold medal was the sad song that was playing in his head like a broken record. His last chance at a gold medal was in the 1000m, which many considered his weaker event.

“In order for anything to be considered a success, you must learn something from the experience. Sometimes, our greatest triumphs can come from what, at the time, seem like our greatest failures, or setbacks.” ~Dan Jansen, Speed skater

Jansen felt his last race would not define his career and also felt that he deserved to win. He remained confident that he could triumph after all the adversity he had suffered from previous races. The result: Dan Jansen won a gold medal in the 1000 meter race - the last race of his Olympic career, a race that he was not favored to win.

You can’t expect that your sports career will be without bumps and dips along the road to stardom. Many successful athletes today are successful because of their ability to grow from defeat and use failure as a springboard to improve and become mentally tough. When defeat or failure is upon you, ask yourself: “How can I use this experience to help me improve or make me a better athlete?”

8 Mental Errors That Ruin Composure

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The first step to gaining maximum composure is to identify the mental breakdowns that cause you to become unraveled or lose emotional control in the big game or when under pressure. If an athlete’s mental game foundation is weak, emotional composure will not be ideal.

For example, an athlete with very high expectations for his performance is likely to become easily frustrated, lose control emotionally, when he believes that those expectations are not being met.

Below is a list of the top 8 mental errors that can hamper your composure.

**Top Mental Game Breakdowns that Lead to Reduced Composure**

1. **Perfectionism** -- When you don’t perform perfectly you lose composure because you become frustrated and then focus too much on your errors instead of the tasks needed to perform well.

2. **Worrying** too much about what others think -- Worrying too much or mind reading into how you think others may judge you distract you from your performance. You lose composure because you are too concerned with how others may perceive your performance.

3. **Irrational Beliefs** -- Irrational beliefs cause you to stay stuck in old, ineffective patterns of behavior.

4. **Fear of Failure** - Fear is based on your intense need to win and causes you to worry too much about losing or failing. This can lead to you play defensive and tentative instead of composed and free.

5. **Doubt** and Lack of Composure -- This happens when you doubt your abilities and undermine your confidence. Without full confidence you are prone to lose composure and get upset.

6. **Comfort Zones** -- This is an expectation about your performance that limits your potential. The comfort zone keeps you stuck in a performance zone or scoring barrier when you do not risk beyond your own comfort zone.

7. **Intimidation** -- When you focus too much on the strengths of your opponents, you have the opportunity to become self-intimidated. And when intimidated, you worry too much about or focus too much on your opponents, especially if they are doing well in competition.

8. **Dwelling on Errors** -- When you get too caught up in mistakes and dwell them, it becomes easier to get frustrated and lose emotional control, which will not help you stay composed after errors.
Enhancing Trust in Yourself

Practice versus Performance Mindsets

Most athletes understand that the goal of practice and training is to perform better in competition. However, many of athletes have difficulty in taking their "practice game" to competition. They develop confidence from practice and training, but when they step onto the course or playing field, confidence dissipates or dwindles.

When you think about it, it does not seem rational that an athlete can gain a high level of confidence from practice and then not have the same level of "competitive self-confidence," but this is the reality for many athletes who seek me out.

Athletes who have this issue are often struck in the practice mindset. They can't let go of training and forgot the REAL purpose of training and practice.

The best athletes in the world understand that the purpose of training is to develop confidence in their skills so they can perform their best when it counts--in competition. They have a balanced routine between training and competition. They are dedicated to training and improving their skills AND have the utmost confidence in their ability when they compete. Both the practice mindset and the performance mindset go hand in hand. One without the other will prevent you from achieving your full potential in sports.

I'm sure you have seen athletes on both ends of the spectrum. Maybe a teammate who would train, train, and train harder, and perform well in practice, only to fall short of his or her true ability in competition. Or maybe you know the athlete who can perform very well in competition without the same devotion to practice that you may have.

The question is how much better can this athlete be if he or she had a better practice mindset?

Many competitive athletes have a strong practice work ethic and motivation, but in competition have a low level of trust and confidence in their abilities.

If you have the practice mindset down pat, but fall short in competition, then we need to discuss how to best transfer your practice or training to competition so you can play up to your true abilities. A "gamer" is an athlete that can get the most out of his or her ability and get the job done in crunch time. This should be your goal.

The practice mentality is characterized by high dedication, unwavering motivation, commitment to your goals in sport, self-critical and analytical behavior, a cognitive mindset, make it happen, improve technique, strive for perfection, the need to look good, and focus on future improvement.

On the other hand, the performance mentality is characterized by complete confidence in what you trained, an automatic or reactive mindset, an accepting and non-judgmental mindset, patience, the ability to win ugly or just get the job done without regard to how you get it done, a present time orientation, and the mindset to rely on instincts or what you have practiced.

You now understand that balance in your practice and performance mindsets are necessary to achieve your athletic potential. The next few mental coaching sessions will address how to balance the practice and performance mindsets to get the most out of your practice and training when it counts most – competition.
Stages of Learning, Practice, & Trust

Remember that the practice mentality is necessary to improve your motor skills, but should not be the mindset when you perform. When you work to improve your motor skills in practice, confidence should improve. However, when you change a well-learned skill to work on something new, such as when you changes instructors or coach, confidence will decline temporarily until you practice the new skill enough to over learn the new skill.

When confidence declines so does trust. Tiger Woods is always working on his mechanics. He went through a change in his technique when he changed instructors from Butch Harmon to Hank Haney. He struggled for a few months to trust the new technique or swing mechanics he and Haney were practicing. You would hear him say, "I just didn't trust it today."

The basis for this lies in the theory of motor learning. When you learn a new skill, you must go through four stages of (motor) learning and this is true when you change a well-learned skill.

The stages are:

- Unconsciousness Incompetence – you don’t know what you don’t know
- Consciousness Incompetence – you know and you know you’re not that good
- Consciousness Competence – you know and you think about being good
- Unconsciousness Competence – you know and you don’t think about being good

As you progress through the stages of learning, you are less cognitive with learning and become more automatic with the execution of skills. The bottom line is that when skill becomes well-learned, you don't have to think about how to execute a skill, it becomes automatic without conscious thought, i.e. Unconsciousness Competence.

Thus the definition of trust is: "Letting go of conscious controlling tendencies and allowing your skills to be run off from motor memory (or what you practiced)." So the purpose of practice is to develop confidence in your skills and allow you performance to happen instinctively or automatically without over thinking the how to.

Athletes that are stuck in the practice mindset never stop training their technique or method. This limits the athlete in competition because he or she has trouble just doing what they have trained to do. If you are stuck in the practice mindset, you might feel like you are doing everything in your power to perform well, yet you do not have the necessary mindset to perform your best in competition.

The goal is not to stop training your technique or working hard to improve. Rather the goal is to know when to train hard and when to let if flow and trust your training. In the next mental coaching session, I will discuss how trust breaks down to help you identify the ways you are limiting your ability in competition.

Enhancing Your Trust in Competition

The ability to perform instinctively is critical to consistent execution in competition. The reason why you practice is so you can trust your method when its time to play.

As you progress through the stages of learning, you develop a memory (motor) program for that movement. With repetition, movements start to feel natural and effortless. As mentioned in the previous section, if you over control well-learned skill, your performance suffers.
Four Steps in Improving Your Trust in Competition

**Step One:** Stop practicing your technique when you play in competition. All the training is complete. Now it the time to put it to the test! In competition, you need to commit to simplifying your method so you can play functionally instead of perfectly. Put your practice behind you. Train your skills with dedication, but then rely on your ability when it’s time to let it flow.

**Step Two:** One of your tasks to increase trust is to change your practice to facilitate your on-course, court, or track performance. You should not spend 100% of your practice time in the practice mindset. This is why football team’s scrimmage and tennis players play practice sets. Consider this a transition time to help get yourself into the competitive mindset. You should spend at least 20% of your practice time in the competitive or performance mindset to help you make an easy transition.

**Step Three:** You have to learn to suspend the over-trying mindset. Trying too hard to be perfect with your performance will not help you let it flow in competition. This requires you simplify your performance. For example, a baseball player should focus on seeing a good pitch and the target when it’s time to execute the throw instead of grinding on how to make a good pitch.

**Step Four:** Stop the over analysis. Avoid game time analysis and critiquing your own skills. Analysis leads you to try to fix what's wrong, which may not need "fixing" in the first place, forget about errors, and move on to the next play, pitch, or shot.

**Performing Your Best In Competition – A Skydiving Perspective**

For many people, there is a lot of anxiety around their personal and teams performance in competition.

Many teams have trained to a high level of performance, only to have their dreams broken by falling apart the day of the meet. There are specific reasons this happens and there is a way to avoid them.

With proper preparation you can avoid the pitfalls encountered by these unlucky teams. There is also a lot to be done the day of the meet, to ensure you perform your best. In this section we will describe the processes to be followed in training, as well as the basic strategies to be observed the day of the meet, which will help you perform your best.

It is important to understand that the meet is won in training. On the day of the meet everything must be automatic. You must understand your plan without thought. Your pace, engineering, how all the pictures look, must be second nature. To do this, you need to train in meet conditions for a long period of time prior to the actual meet. You must train at the same speed and intensity you will compete with. You must make no changes in technique even if it is obviously better. Change your game plan from pushing for more speed and better times to one that develops consistency in your performance. Keep detailed records so you will better understand what you are capable of. Remember: if you do no know it, you are not going to learn it the day of the meet.

The hungrier you are to jump, the better you will perform. As the meet draw is near, the team needs to rest. Make less jumps, take a day off, two or three days prior to the first round. Jump half days for the reminder, just to stay warm. Trim down the intensity, or completely cease, your fitness routines, allowing your body to fully recover and be at its strongest. Take part in healthy distractions. Get off the drop zone and engage in different sports. This will allow your mind to relax, yet keep your mind and body sharp for the meet. It is preferable to do this with your team, keeping that energy consolidated. Do not party, as it is a distraction that will dull your senses and distance you from your connection with the sport.
The more energy we have, the better we will perform. Unfortunately, we have a finite supply of this precious commodity. There are many things we can do to gather and save energy. Come to the meet prepared. Have a place to stay that will be comfortable to you. Be sure you have or can easily get the food and water that you need. Plan to have all the equipment you may need: creepers, video gear and skydiving gear. Come to the meet early. We need a lot of time to acclimate to an area. We must get used to the aircraft, the drop zone systems, the food, the air and our own operating plan. We do not want any shocks to our system at the day of the meet. Have a specific game plan so that everyone is very clear about what is expected of him. Make it efficient and thorough, so that everything is done with the least possible expenditure of energy. It is best if the team can stick together as much as possible. People feel strong and safe when they are with their team. Know where everyone is at all the time and communicate with each other about where you are going. It will help if the team has a meeting area where everyone spends all his free time.

During the meet, there is a lot that can be done to conserve energy. It is important that you stay relaxed between rounds or during any weather holds. You can burn a tremendous amount of energy in these times, leading to exhaustion. As you relax, you must stay mentally alert. You must be prepared to make your next round at almost any time. Try reading or playing game-boy but do not sleep, as waking completely from sleep can take more time than you have. Find distractions that work for you. Take care of your diet and be sure to eat many small meals to avoid lethargy. Avoid socializing, as it will sap a lot of energy. There will be plenty of time for socializing at the banquet.

As the meet draw is near, people experience an unusually high level of stress. This will tend to shorten their tempers and create a general paranoia. Good communication becomes even more critical. Have very regular team meetings, preferably everyday, where one is free to speak their mind. This will alleviate fears and conflicts that could produce major problems later.

Know the rules. Not knowing the rules at a meet is like going to court without a lawyer. Meets have been won and lost by teams manipulation of the rules. Remember: it is not what you do that counts, but it is what the judges see. You must skydive for them, so train for them.

Many competitors talk of feeling pressure or stress to such a level as to hinder their performance. This stress is something experienced when we enter into an unknown situation, one where there is a certain element of danger such as the risk of failure. When we sense danger, our body reacts in many ways to prepare itself for fight. A certain amount of this will enhance our performance; too much will negatively influence our best efforts. Much of the time, the stress is allowed to run away with itself. If you can put that energy to use for yourself, it will make you better. The first thing to do is to change what you call it. Instead of calling it pressure or stress, call it energy. Energy is something we think of as controllable. Channel that extra energy to improve your skydiving. Focus it into your anticipation or your awareness. Use it to make you stronger, giving you more endurance and a general feeling of invincibility.

Confidence is the keystone to performing at your best. When you are confident, your mind and body are relaxed allowing them to perform at their best. Your outlook is positive, keeping you visualizing the correct action. There are a few things that can be done to ensure you have the highest level of confidence possible. First of all, engineer your competition dives so that you are doing things that you have already successfully done in the past. Just knowing that you done this kind of move before, will give you confidence. Be sure you stick to your game plan. It is a common mistake of teams to see their competition doing something, which is obviously better but something they have never done, and change their plan at the last moment. Although the move may be faster, you will be unfamiliar with it and therefore uncomfortable. To do this correctly, you must be aware of what you can do. Train properly by sticking to a plan and keeping good records, and you will know it. With deciding how to do the meet dives, the bottom line is: go with what feels comfortable.
Choose a couple of different options, run through them on the creepers, and pick the one that feels good even if it is not the absolute most efficient method.

Positive visualization is paramount for confidence. When you are reviewing the rounds in your head, see them working perfectly. If your fears intrude and start making you see mistakes, know them for what they are and put them away from your mind. Remember it is your mind, so you are in control of what you think.

Positive support from your teammates and those close to you, will also help to cover the long way towards building your confidence. A history of positive support will relieve you from the stress of worrying about what these people will think of you if you make a mistake. When mistakes happen, realize that the person is trying his best and support him with positive reinforcement. Remember: his performance on the next round is tied to his confidence, and your success in the meet is tied to his performance. If you make a mistake, realize that you are better than that and go up on the next round determined to do your best. Let the last jump go, so you can focus on the next.

Most people pile too much pressure on themselves. They are overly concerned with what people will think of them if they make a mistake. They will go into competition with the belief that they cannot make a single mistake. Expecting perfection from yourself, is unreasonable and unachievable. Be OK with making mistakes and be OK with your teammates making them.

We find it very helpful to look at the meet as a series of one rounds competitions.

Whether we are ahead or behind, we go at top speed. We work to not pay attention to the scores and focus solely on personal best each round. The score comes from performing so all your attention should be there. There is no defense in this game and, therefore, nothing you can do beyond to achieve your competition performance best. Focus on your own stuff and let the judges decide who won.

Trust in yourself and your teammates, is a critical ingredient to success. Good trust in the team will save energy and build confidence. Not having to wonder about your teammates, gives you more energy and build confidence. Not having to wonder about your teammates, gives you more energy to spend on yourself. Knowing they will be where they say they will unloads the majority of variables and therefore the majority of worries. Trust is something that must be earned. It is important that during training, everyone practices what he preaches. Say what you mean and do what you say. Train to Win. Compete to do your Best.

This information is courtesy of Arizona Airspeed: USA Skydiving Team and Oneteam Inc: Organization Development Consultants
Identifying Ineffective Belief Systems

Roadblocks to Success: Self-limiting Beliefs

Self-limiting behavior comes in many forms. It includes preconceived notions, unhealthy expectations, and irrational thoughts you may have formed about your abilities, skills, and chances of success.

The sum of your experiences over a lifetime, upbringing, education, and the interaction with others have shaped your beliefs and expectations. Some of these beliefs are rational and helpful and others are irrational and harmful to your performance.

If you examine the psychological makeup of history's greatest athletes, the ones who have broken long-standing records, a pattern exists among them. These athletes had the ability to rise above their own expectations and break records that were considered beyond reach. It's clear that these people were not conformers; they were not confined by the expectations of others. They were open-minded to the idea of breaking records that most people considered out of reach.

Once an athlete overcomes a mental or physical barrier, suddenly the barrier no longer exists and new expectations or limits of what is possible are formed. Before Roger Bannister broke the 4-minute mile barrier, scientists believed that it was physically impossible for a human to cover that amount of ground in less than four minutes because the previous record time of 4:01.3 had stood for nine years. Bannister broke the four-minute mile barrier in 1954 with a time of 3:59.4. That changed everyone's thinking about the mile run. Within four years of Bannister's run, 16 other runners had broken the barrier. When asked to explain his record run, Bannister said, "It's the ability to take more out of yourself than you've got."

Jim Murphy has a long and successful career (almost twenty years) training top professional and Olympian athletes to get the very best out of themselves.

“Peak performance has a few common characteristics,” says Jim. “Passion. Enjoyment. Heightened awareness. Getting caught up in the moment-to-moment focus. Full engagement. All top athletes have commonalities when they perform at their best: a clear mind and unburdened heart, a positive focused energy, and powerful beliefs.”

“What you think is crucial. It is, in fact, the core of a champion—who they are, how they train and how they compete comes down to how they think. The thoughts you repeat over and over in your mind, whether these are positive or negative, will create your beliefs. So an athlete wanting to perform at his peak needs to develop powerful beliefs about himself. Every thought you have has energy, and, as an athlete, you know that focusing your energy is a top priority.”

Jim elaborates on what he means by focusing energy: “The amateur athlete has three to four times the amount of thoughts as an elite athlete. The elite athlete works years to control his thoughts and feelings, developing a powerful focus—a presence. The amateur has his mind filled with thousands of random, useless, and worst of all negative thoughts. This cluttered mind I call ‘the monkey mind,’ and it is one of the biggest obstacles to peak performance.”

These examples highlight the importance of putting aside preconceptions of what is possible to achieve, not to inherit the expectations of others in society that holds you back, and to rise above one's own doubts in order to break through mental hurdles before breaking through physical ones. Let go of what is and what is not possible to achieve so you can go after your dreams.
Identifying Irrational Beliefs

What are irrational beliefs?

They are thoughts, feelings, ideas, attitudes, or ingrained ways of behaving that are self-defeating and often not based on what you can observe in reality.

They are often made up stories in your mind, similar to the process of mind reading I introduced in an earlier mental coaching session, which create additional stress, anxiety, or worry about your performance.

Irrational beliefs are automatic scripts you keep in your head about how you believe life "should" treat us and others. They can also be ineffective, habitual responses you learned to apply when faced with trying situations.

You will notice that some irrational beliefs are based on your own expectations, while others are born out of perfectionism. And some irrational ideologies come from social approval, which I discussed in the last session.

The goal here is for you to dig down into your mind and uncover another mental breakdown that causes you to feel pressure and sabotages your performance -- irrational beliefs.

How are irrational beliefs related to composure?

Let me give an example. The classic example is perfectionism. The perfectionistic athlete believes that he or she should and must perform perfectly to win or play well. If you have some perfectionism, this is an unrealistic demand you place on yourself that causes additional expectations about performance.

For examples, a racing athlete was dealing with the issue of irrational beliefs. His challenge was that he viewed winning as success and anything less as a failure -- which is called “all or nothing” thinking. If he was passed on the track or does not have a chance to win, he became frustrated and stopped trying altogether.

Needless to say, his irrational beliefs were chipping away at his ability to perform. Through this illustration, you can see how easily this type of thinking can sabotage any athlete.

Are you aware of your own self-defeating beliefs?

This is a big step in itself -- you must be able to identify the beliefs that cause you to feel anxious or frustrated in competition.

Let's start by defining some of the top irrational beliefs in sport

The Top Irrational Beliefs in Sports:

1. **Perfectionism.** An unrealistic expectation of performing perfectly leading to excessive pressure and frustration when not performing up to one's expectations.

2. **Attaching Self-worth to Achievement.** Athletes wrongly measure their self-worth based on their success or failure.
3. **Self-Conscious Behavior.** This is a belief that you are the focus of people around you, which is born out of social approval.

4. **All or None Thinking.** Some perfectionistic athletes view their performance as black and white; or win or lose.

5. **Over-Generalization.** Athletes use past events, sometimes a single event, to define expectations for future performances. It then becomes a self-defeating prophecy about what should happen in future performance such as “I never swim well in this pool.”

6. **Negative Self-Labels.** Self-labels are some of the most destructive beliefs that will hold athletes back from reaching full potential. These are judgmental self-labels you use to define yourself as an athlete. Self-labels are hard to overcome.

What irrational beliefs or negative self-labels, based on the areas above, have to adopt in your sports career that your think have held you back?

For examples, do you see yourself as a poor closer at the end of the game?

This would be an example of a negative self-label that you must recognize that needs to change.

### Coping with Irrational Beliefs

Irrational beliefs are thoughts, feelings, ideas, attitudes, or ingrained ways of behaving that are self-defeating and often not based on what you can observe in reality. They are not easy to change overnight because you have developed them over years.

Now, take a concerted effort on your part to change your irrational beliefs or negative self-labels.

Your next task is to change your unhealthy beliefs that cause anxiety or pressure into healthy statements or beliefs. This means you have to adopt a belief system that helps you stay composed under pressure.

It's a big step just to recognize and identify these beliefs even exist, but in order to improve your performance, you must go one step further. You begin by changing these beliefs to a healthy mindset for performance. This can be a difficult task if the belief is one that you have held onto all your life.

The process begins by questioning yourself about these beliefs -- you can look at this as a personal rebuttal to your own ineffective beliefs. The next step after the rebuttal part is to develop a view (belief system) about yourself and your ability that falls in line with helping you become confident, focused, and composed in competition.

Here is an example:

1. **Unhealthy belief:** "If I don't finish first in the race, I am a loser." You can see all or none thinking here and a negative self-label if he does not win the race.

2. **Rebuttal and healthy belief:** "Winning does not make me a better person and losing does not mean I am a loser in life. I am not perfect and can't win every race I enter. I accept this. I am a good person no matter if I win or lose in sport. I choose to focus on my performance rather than where I finished in the race. I am happy with my racing when I can perform up to my physical skills and talents."
I am firm believer that you have to look carefully at the beliefs that stifle your ability to perform with composure, confidence, focus, and consistency. Once you can identify your own ineffective beliefs, it is time to accept that change is necessary.

The final step is to adopt a rational mindset by replacing irrational beliefs with healthy ones by taking an objective or rational approach.

**Developing a Healthy & Rational Philosophy – A Golfer Perspective**

The first step in developing a healthy philosophy or beliefs about your golf is to uncover and identify the specific self-limiting beliefs or expectations that may hold you back from playing your best.

Armed with this information you are in a position to challenge your self-limiting beliefs and adopt a new philosophy about the game of golf.

Identify your expectations & labels. As discussed in last months newsletter, several different types of limiting beliefs exist. I will discuss a few of the most common expectations that limit you.

1. "I'm failing if I can't break 70 today." I am not a fan of target scores, but this one can make you feel frustrated easily if you are not on track to accomplish the target.

2. "I hope I don't lose it on the back nine." This is a big one for many amateurs who shoot a good score on the front and then start to worry about back nine results.

3. "Here I go again" syndrome. This one is deadly to stalling momentum. A good example is the golfer who makes the first mistake of the round and says to himself "Here I go again, making a double and screwing up a good round."

4. "I always play poorly when...". This is the number one generalization in golf. The classic example is the golfer who has trouble playing a troubling hole and approaches it from a defensive mindset.

Change your lingo.

Irrational beliefs, according to psychologist Albert Ellis, often take the form of absolute statements such as, "I must break 70 or I am a failure." Ellis states that people need to change the terminology they use to describe events or needs. The goal is to abolish absolute thinking (via changes in terminology) to stop making unrealistic demands on yourself and others. The major task is to replace dire needs with preferences and desires, such as, "I would prefer to shoot the best score possible today."

Dispute and rationalize. People adopt irrational beliefs that limit success because they do not dispute the reality or evidence for the belief. Let's use an example of an irrational or unhealthy belief: "I always end up making a big number to ruin my round." In this case the golfer anticipates a train wreck at some point during the round probably because it has happen in the past (a generalization). You can learn to argue against or dispute these irrational ideas. You have to look at the evidence for this belief. Just because it has happened in the past, does that automatically mean it will happen repeatedly.

Replace with a healthy belief system. The hardest step is to adopt a healthy philosophy or attitude that helps you play better golf. Let’s use an example of what it means to replace a unhealthy belief with a healthy one.

Unhealthy belief: "I don't play well every time I have to tee off early in the morning."
Healthy belief: "Today I believe I can turn it around and play well early in the morning." Which one do you think will give you a better chance at playing well?

Step outside the 'box' and take a risk. The difficult part about changing one's attitude is that a golfer wants to hold onto those ineffective beliefs for whatever reasons. It may seem like taking a risk to view an event or situation in a different way. I often challenge athletes with an assignment to get them to think 'outside the box' and push beyond what feels natural to do. If you are very score conscious during the round, for example, keep track of something else such as fairways and greens hit and set a goal to do so.

Avoid Negative Labels. Often a player gets labeled by one of his peers (or himself) and then adopts the label. Soon the negative label takes on a life of its own and the player internalizes the label as part of his self-concept. If you think you are a streaky putter, for example, you will live up to that label. Here are examples of a few negative labels some of athletes maintained: "I'm an airport player," "I'm a range pro," "I'm a choker," "I'm a poor closer," "I'm a slow starter," or "I'm a mental midget." You can see that how destructive it can be to adopt negative labels.
Goal Setting for Success

Setting Goals to Develop a Championship Attitude

What is developing a championship attitude?

This is a broad statement that includes several facets such as:

1. Have every team member and coach agree to the team philosophy and goals,
2. Develop an atmosphere of teamwork
3. Instill an attitude of winning and success in the players and coaches.

"The tough part is getting everyone to accept that each role as important. Everyone needs to feel needed, that they are important." --John Wooden

The first step before setting goals is developing a team philosophy. This helps all players and coaches “get on the same page.” Every team member and coach needs to feel apart of the process rather than ramming the goals down the throat of the team. In addition, every member of the team needs to adopt the philosophy that team goals are more important that individual accomplishments. Once a team agrees to the team philosophy, setting goals flows easily. Here is an example of a team philosophy:

Every team member and coach agrees to have an unselfish, ego-less attitude, in which the team wins with all and/or any parts of the game (offense, defense, special teams, etc.).

Teams should consider three types of goals:

1. Outcome goals
2. Performance goals
3. Mental goals

Outcome goals focus on W-L record, conference championships, and titles. These are long-term or season-end goals.

Performance goals are shorter-term and include goals that focus on certain areas of the game such as decreasing points allowed, decreasing turnovers, rushing yardage, and consist of any game statistic.

Mental goals focus on improving mental game abilities (very short term and based on one play at a time) such as committing to the play call, rehearsing each play, and letting go of errors. All three types of goals should be a part of your goals setting program.

What is the process for setting goals?

Begin by setting some goals based on you want to accomplish at the end of the season. If it’s to make the playoffs or get a bowl game for example, what do you need to focus on each week to reach that goal?

A key element is setting goals based on what the team needs to improve. Finally, what goals (or cues) does each player have to focus on in the games?

These are the process goals (mental game goals) that help players focus on one play at a time. So, work backwards with your goals setting and end at what has to be done on each play.
What are some guidelines for setting goals?

Goals should include the following criteria:

- Set specific and measurable goals. Stats work well here.
- Set goals that match player ability (do not get stuck trying to be realistic here)
- Set season, mid-season, end as well as weekly goals
- Set goals for practice and games
- Set positively stated goals instead of negatively stated goals

Finally, set performance goals, not just outcome goals. Outcome goals are easy to set. What is harder is setting performance goals that will help you accomplish the outcome.

These should focus on improving your weaknesses and building on strengths. A performance goal may involve retaining possession of the ball on each drive (no turnovers) or having players commit to each play of the game (mental goal). My philosophy is this: working the process (setting performance & mental goals) is what wins championships. Good results flow from taking care of business on each play!

**Setting Goals to Improve Focus in Practice – A Swimmers Perspective**

Setting goals are an important part of structuring practice and improving the quality of your swimming practice. It is common for the swimmers to have clear goals about what success they want to achieve in swimming. However, when it comes to training and practice sessions, many swimmers do not have well defined goals.

Training for any sport is critical to success in competition, swimming is no different. The best swimmers in the world are often the swimmers that train smart. By training smart, I mean having well-structured goals for each practice session that help swimmers get the most out of each session.

So how do you set better practice goals to develop focus?

One option is to make your goals specific to what you will face in competition. There is no use training your focus on aspects of swimming that are irrelevant to performance. For example, focusing on what the other competitors are doing in their training is not relevant to your practice.

Instead, set goals that help you focus on the processes needed for successful execution. These types of goals are mini-goals or process goals. Process goals help a swimmer dial in their focus on the relevant tasks needed for success in the pool. Therefore, in training align your mindset to focus on the process goals.

Different process goals can be set for different aspects of a race or event. Swimmers should have process goals for the start, turns, beginning, middle and end of a race. For example, one process goals could be to good reaction time for your starts. Focusing on your process goals should be a priority for you during a training session.

Below are two goal-orientated drills for practice to help you improve your focus in competition. The first drill helps you deal with typical distraction you will experience at a meet and will help your remain focused when distracting events occur.
Purposeful Distraction Drill
You will need a partner to do this drill or another source of distraction, such as an audio recording. The goal is to perform a skill in swimming you do every day. For example, at the starts, have another person distract you on purpose while you try to make a fast start.

A friend, coach, or parent will need to do his best to distract you by saying things such as, "don't be slow of the block" or "don't slip when the gun goes." Your goal is to pay attention to performing the task, while ignoring the external distraction. This is one of the methods Earl Woods, Tiger's father, used to train Tiger to concentration with distractions.

The second drill used visualization to help you improve focus. This drill can be used in competition and practice.

Mental Rehearsal/Imagery Drill
If you tried visualization or mental rehearsal in the past, you have already practiced concentrating intensely. Visualizing a successful play in hockey can only be done with intense concentration. Mental rehearsal might be the most applicable concentration exercise in a practice setting.

Begin by picking a task in your sport that you can't practice often or are limited in your practice. Skydivers, for example, need to rely heavily on their mental imagery skills to learn maneuvers during ground training due the expense of practicing in the air.

The goal with this drill is to visualize your performance from a first person perspective (like you are actually performing the skill rather than watching yourself such as when you watch a video). This is when you want to keep focused while visualizing starts, turns and long-distance events.

The above exercises give you a specific structure for practice to improve your focus. Setting process goals during practice will also help you improve focus during your practice and ultimately in competition so you can perform your best.

Tools to Help Maintain a Process Focus
An obsession with the outcome or result of the game, match, or performance is a distraction rather than a motivator.

Golf pro, Phil Mickelson frequently talks about how his goal every week is to win the golf tournament. But what he doesn't say is how he goes about winning the golf tournament. Phil may say to the media that his goal was to shoot a 67 to win, but he does not obsess on his score with every shot on the course. He knows that playing one shot at a time is what will bring his best chance of a low round - doing his best on each shot.

A great deal of coaching is spent working with athletes to help them to stop obsessing about the outcome of the game, match, or event. In most cases, thinking about the outcome is only a distraction to a process focus. Everyone wants to win, so put that goal aside and ask yourself how you will win on a moment-by-moment or play-by-play process – “The ability to work the process is what brings good results.”

The best way to maintain a focus on the process is to set simple objectives (mini-goals) for the day to help lock your focus on the process instead of outcomes. I don't really mean goals in the traditional sense here. A better term is "focal points." The idea is to occupy your mind with a mission that stresses the present moment objectives instead of outcomes or results.

Then there are two different types of goals to help lock the mind into execution:
• Performance Goals - goals based on something you can measure such as number of rebounds or blocked shots.

• Mental Goals - goals based on your mental game that help you focus on one play, shot, or routine at a time such as committing to a plan or visualizing your pitch before you start the wind up.

The purpose of the above goals is to help you become immersed into the ingredients of the task to have a solid mental game. Goals often serve as reminders as to what to focus on for certain skills.

**Drive For Success! Goal Achievement Process**

Setting goals is one of the most important components to success in golf and in life! Every great player sets goals covertly or overtly. When Tiger Woods was a young boy, he set a goal to break all of Jack Nicklaus’ records, so he wrote down this dream. Tiger reminded himself of his dream every night. To date, Tiger is ahead of schedule in making his dream become reality. All champions in sports start with a dream. The greatest champions of all stay committed to that dream by setting and achieving key goals.

Part of staying committed to your dream is a relentless drive for success through setting, evaluating, and reformulating your goals. In today’s high-tech world, you need to take a multi-disciplined approach to your golf improvement. You can set many different goals in golf beyond just performance or scoring goals. Golfers can set practice goals, mental goals, and fitness goals as well.

Part of your goal achievement program includes monitoring your playing and practice goals to help you stay committed to the dream and to keep you on the right track. Below are examples of areas that you can apply goal setting if you take a multi-disciplined approach to improving your golf game.

• *Performance Goals*: These are set to help you strive for success and to better your game (handicap, scoring, or wins).

• *Performance Statistics*: Measure the various areas of your game, such as ball striking and putting. These include golf statistics such as greens hit in regulation, fairways hit, up and down percentage, etc. I will discuss more about keeping stats later.

• *Practice Goals*: Define the time per week, quality of practice, golf lessons, etc., that make up your practice plan.

• *Mental Game Goals*: These you set to improve things like confidence, focus, trust, composure, pre-shot routine, etc.

• *Physical Fitness Goals*: These are set to improve strength, flexibility, stamina, and other fitness measures to improve your overall game and health.

• *Nutrition Goals*: On course: nutrition and fluid intake. Off course: a nutrition program, diet goals, etc.

• *Course Management Goals*: These include the study of the course, pick targets, clubs of tees, game plan, etc.
In summary, setting goals for your game is important for the following reasons:

1. To enhance your motivation and commitment.
2. To help you stay focused on what to accomplish.
3. To assess your strengths and weaknesses so you can structure practice accordingly.
4. To keep track of your performance improvements and progress.

**Step 1: Decide on Your Goals – A Golfer Perspective**

The first step is to decide what your goals will be. That is, what you need to work on in practice and competition to reach those goals. I think every player should set or evaluate his or her goals before the golf season, or during the off-season. Your goals, however, should be directed at more than just lowering scoring average or handicap. To me, the main purpose of goals is to focus your attention and energy on what you want to accomplish and on the plan for achieving those goals.

Goals direct your attention and focus you on improvement. I talk about four categories of goals (broken down by time line):

- Long-term or dream
- Intermediate
- Short-term
- Immediate or what I call process goals.

I’m sure you have read or heard about the first three. The fourth helps you stay grounded in the present moment when performing.

**Long-Term or Dream Goals**

Long-term, or dream goals, are the driving force behind your ambition and desire; every other goal supports accomplishing the dream goal. You have to start by deciding where you want to go with your game.

What do you want to accomplish in the next two to five years?

Some examples of long-term goals include becoming a scratch golfer, winning the club championship, qualifying to play on one of the Tours, or winning a pro tournament. Below are some common dream goals in golf at various levels of the game:

- To break 80 for the first time
- To win a club championship
- To qualify and play in your state amateur tournament
- To win a college golf tournament
- To become a scratch golfer
- To play tour level golf
- To win on the PGA or LPGA Tour
- To be the best golfer in the world

Obviously, you want your long-term or dream goal to match your current level of skill. It’s not practical if you are a 10 handicap to say that you want to qualify for the PGA Tour in one year. I will qualify this statement and say that you don’t want to restrict yourself either by being too limited about what you hope to accomplish with your game.
Do not be afraid of setting goals for your game for fear of not reaching them because, the truth is, you may not. I look at goals as an opportunity for you to strive for success instead of an opportunity not to accomplish something. Goals should be tough to accomplish and it is the striving for the goals that is often more important than the product itself. You never really get there in golf. As soon as a player reaches a milestone in his or her career, new and improved goals are set immediately. The process of resetting goals is endless in the world of golf.

**Intermediate Goals**

Intermediate goals are objectives you want to accomplish in the next six months to a year, which will help you achieve your long-term goals.

The question you want to ask yourself is this: what do I want to accomplish this year (or next season) with my golf game?

This goal is more specific now than the broad dream goal. You can set goals to improve various parts of your game, performance goals, fitness goals, and mental goals, to name a few. Ask yourself, what do you want to accomplish this year in golf? Here are some typical responses:

- Retain my playing card
- Win at least one golf tournament
- Have 5 top 10’s or more
- Be in contention to win a tournament 3 times
- Improve my focus on the golf course

The next step is to assess the current state of your golf game. You want to measure your strengths and weaknesses in the various areas of your game (putting, chipping, driving, irons, course management, etc.). In what areas do you need to improve the most? What parts of your game are holding you back from greater success? What needs to improve to reach your season-long goals?

This requires a second set of goals directed at improving specific parts of your game, which will improve your overall performance.

For example, if you are averaging 33 putts per round, one of your goals may be to achieve an average of 30 or less putts per round. This would lower your stroke average by three shots or more, given the same number of full shots you take!

Below are some examples of performance areas for improvement:

- Improve putts per round average
- Improve driving accuracy
- Hit more greens in regulation
- Improve short game and ability to get up and down
- Enhance mental game skills
- Improve fitness and stamina
- Improve course management skills
- Have more birdie opportunities

Determine the game areas in which you need to improve. This will require that you do some groundwork by honestly assessing your current game. You will need to keep some general statistics to help you gauge your weaknesses.
What is unclear for most golfers is how to measure the mental side of the game. This will require some self-monitoring of your thoughts and reactions on the golf course.

You can now start to set specific objectives to improve in those designated areas. If you want to improve putting, for example, you may strive to eliminate three-putts, reduce the number of putts per round, reduce your putts per green in regulation, or make more putts inside of 10 feet.

**Short-Term Goals**

Short-term goals are what you want to accomplish this week or maybe this month. These goals will help you stay focused in practice and play on what you are working on for the next week or two. These goals just extend the intermediate goals you have set, only with more specifics on how you will reach your intermediate goals.

These goals define the week-to-week practice and competition objectives you will want to focus on to attain your longer-range goals. Keep in mind that goals can be set for practice, competition, or personal improvement (i.e., fitness and nutrition).

At this time, I need to step back and talk about the “how to” of setting goals. First, goals should be specific, measurable, and time-dependent. Instead of setting the goal to “get better this year,” be more specific with a timetable in mind, such as, “Improve my handicap three strokes by October 1st this year.” A measurable goal is one that you know when you have achieved it. If you currently hit eight greens a round, then your goal may be to hit 10 greens per round during this week or month.

I want to reinforce the idea that short-term performance goals should be set high...a bit higher than your current ability to push yourself, to help you strive for success. You want to reach for your goals, but at the same time, don’t become obsessed with having to achieve ALL your goals!

Set goals that match your ability. As I stated earlier, your goals should push you to higher levels of performance, but be attainable. If you are hitting only seven fairways a round, it’s not practical to set a goal to hit thirteen fairways a round, but it is manageable for you to hit eight or nine fairways a round. Set performance goals, not just outcome goals.

Most golfers are stuck on setting outcome goals like “score for 18 holes” or “finish in X place in the tournament.”

If you do a good job of hitting greens and fairways, good outcomes will come with hitting some performance goals. Performance goals relate to doing your best on a shot-by-shot basis. Performance goals can be set around hitting fairways, hitting greens in regulation, getting up and down, one putting, and sticking to your pre-determined game plan.

Set positively stated goals. Some golfers make the mistake of setting goals for what they don’t want to do. These are negatively stated goals, which cause you to focus on avoiding bad play. Below are examples of negatively stated goals:

- To not hit the ball out of play
- To not make any three-putts
- To not make any double bogeys
- To not get upset after a bad shot

I call the use of such goals “avoidance golf.” The above goals only make you focus on what you don’t want to do, and then what do you really think about?

Avoiding mistakes!

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Make sure your goals are positively stated, so you focus on what you want to accomplish, such as “I want to keep the ball in play for 18 holes.” Or “I want to stay composed after errors.”

Set practice goals as well as performance goals. Practice goals can include the amount of time you spend in practice and the various parts of the game (putting, chipping, full shot, etc.). Practice goals can also include drills you want to accomplish in each practice.

For example, spend 50% of practice time on the greens improving touch. Another example is setting a goal to hit 20 three-footers in a row before you leave the green.

Process Goals
What most players don’t realize is that good results come from working the process. You are able to hit your tee shot in the fairway when you know how to plan a shot, align your body, aim the club, and make a good swing. Process goals are really just an extension of short-term goals you set for the week. Process goals or today’s performance goals help you strive for excellence and help to keep you focused on playing one shot at a time. These are the most important daily goals to have on the course!

We know that the goal in golf is to shoot the lowest score, shoot low on each hole, hit your target with each shot, and make every possible putt. This is obvious. To plan a shot you have to think about what you want to happen, correct? Yes, but dwelling too much on outcomes during a round in unhealthy. Results come from focusing on the process of execution. If you worry too much about the outcome, you can’t focus on what you need to do to get a good result.

Maintaining a present focus is a key lesson I teach to players—and this is what process goals help you do. Hitting good shots and making putts comes from paying attention to the process of execution. So process goals can be set based on some simple performance goals you want to achieve during the round.

When you focus on execution, results take care of themselves. What do I mean when I say “focus on execution?” I don’t mean focusing on mechanics. I am talking about having a plan of what you want to do with a shot and sticking to that plan.

You hit your best shot by immersing yourself in your preparation—target selection, club selection, visualization of the shot, aim and alignment, and a target focus. After the club makes contact with the ball, you can’t alter the outcome. Plan your shot, rehearse it in your mind, prepare your body, and execute the shot. What happens next is out of your control.

Two categories of process goals you can set for a round:

1. Mental goals such as picking a target, staying in the present, and sticking to game plan.
2. Performance goals such as fairways hit, greens in regulation, up and down percentage, etc.

Focus on performance and mental process goals each tournament week and, more specifically, each day. Process goals help you achieve the long-term goals, but also help you to focus on playing each shot to the best of your ability while de-emphasizing results. You can set performance goals such as number of greens hit, fairways hit, total number of putts, etc.

I like players to include one or two mental goals in the game plan. The mental goals revolve around one or two things you need to improve mentally. These can vary from day to day. The mental goals relate to mental strategies on which you have been working.
A college golfer was losing his focus over the ball because he was erratic with his routine, which often happens when you first change a player’s routine. One goal he set was to stop his routine and refocus for six or more shots during the round when he “drifted” from his routine or became distracted. As part of his plan, he was to focus on each shot and regroup when he caught himself wandering. This is just one example of how mental game goals apply to playing golf one shot at a time.

Other examples of mental goals:

- Visualize/feel every shot before I step up to the ball
- Be totally committed to the line I select for each putt
- Stay focused on playing one shot at a time
- Stay patient with my putting after hitting each putt
- Be more accepting of myself after mistakes
- Put the last shot behind me within ten seconds after it’s over
- Relax between shots and enjoy the day

Mental goals are harder to assess and more difficult to measure, but are still worth the effort. You can generally assess how well you did with your mental goals after the round. You do this by thinking about your preparation for and reaction to each shot after the round. Don’t keep track of well you are accomplishing your process goals for the round, save this until after the round. Give yourself a general idea (percentage of completion) as to the how well you did with a particular mental goal.

One last note on this: You don’t want to go crazy with process goals and think about too many mental goals during the round. A simplistic approach is better than scatterbrained approach. I suggest you pick one or two from your list above and focus on attaining those goals. Setting mental goals may require the assistance of a trained mental game coach and I can assist you with this task. For the purpose of this workbook, I want to make you aware of the importance of mental game goals to help you develop a stronger mental game.

**Setting Your Performance Goals**

Performance goals can be easily set, measured, and tracked. Below is a list of the most common performance statistics and round details you can track along with a few other stats I think are very helpful for tracking your performance and modifying your practice going forward. One of the advantages of tracking game stats is to help you structure your practice in a way that helps you shore up your weaker parts of the game.

**Common Statistics to Track**

Below is a list of the most common statistics you can track along with a description of each. The statistics you track will depend on your goals and what you want to improve.

I would encourage you to track all the stats below. Later, you can modify the programs to track the most relevant statistics for your ability.

- **Course/Date/Par** - you will want to keep track of the course you played on, the date played, and par for 18 holes.
• **Fairways hit in regulation** - this is a measure of driving accuracy, which you can determine as a percentage. This stat can be misleading depending on the width of the fairways, what clubs you hit off the tees, and how far you hit the ball. For the most part, the more fairways you hit, the better chance you will have at hitting the green in regulation. For the purpose of comparison the top PGA Tour players are about 68% and about 72% for the LPGA Tour or around 10 out of 14 fairways. If you hit 10 or more fairways per round, you have Tour-qualify driving accuracy.

• **Greens hit in regulation** - measures your ability to hit accurate irons. This statistic depends on how many fairways you hit, the length of the rough, and any penalty shots (hitting the ball out of play) you had during rounds. The top 50 on the PGA Tour was about 70% and 65% for the LPGA Tour; 13 or 12 greens out of 18 respectively. If you hit 12 or more greens per round, you would have Tour-qualify ball striking in terms of greens in regulation. This is for comparison purposes only.

• **Scrambling percentage** - also called up and down greenside percentage. This is the percent of time that a player misses the green in regulation, but still makes par or better. The top 50 on the PGA Tour is 60% and for scrambling. Therefore, a goal of 50% in scrambling is a good starting place for most scratch to low handicap golfers.

• **Sand saves** - is a measure of your sand game greenside and is the percent of time a player was able to get 'up and down' from a bunker greenside. The top 50 on the PGA Tour is 53% to 54% and about 40% on the LPGA Tour top 50 list.

• **Putts per round** - putts per round is the average number of putts per round played. This is a general measure of your putting performance. The top 50 on the PGA Tour was about 28.75 putts per round and about 29.75 putt per round on the LPGA Tour. I consider a good putting round to be 30 or less putts per round. This stat is dependent on the number of greens you hit, how close you hit it to the flag, and chipping performance.

• **Number of one-putts per round** - is a measure of your putting performance. It may also be influenced by how many greens you hit and how close you chip the ball after missing greens. It’s a great measure of how many putts you sink on the first putt on the green.

• **100 yards and in up and down percentage** - this is a measure of your short wedge performance. It measures how often you can get the ball up and down from the fairway less than 100 yards. This stat does not include greenside chipping.

• **Birdie average** - measures the average number of birdies you make per round of golf. The top 50 on the PGA Tour is about 3.75 birdies per round and 3.42 birdies per round on the LPGA Tour. The number of greens hit and putting performance influences this statistic.

• **Birdie opportunities 0-10 feet** - this is the average number of birdie chances you have from 0-10 feet per round. The statistic gauges how many great opportunities you have to make birdie each round.

• **Birdie opportunities 11-25 feet** - this is the average number of birdie chances you have from 11-25 feet per round. Measure how close you are hitting your approach shots along with the previous stat. This stat and previous one should be assessed together because both will indicate how close you are hitting your approach shots into the greens.
• **Scoring** - obviously you will want to keep track of the scores you shoot each day on both the front and back nine. Some players like to break it up into thirds and look at their score in relation to par on the first, middle, and last six holes of the round, to see if any pattern exists.

**Other Guidelines for Setting Goals**

It’s fine to track several statistics in your game, especially initially when you are assessing your game to get a handle on the areas of your game you need to most improve. Some players just don’t like the time commitment involved in tracking several statistics.

One mistake I see players making is trying to focus on too many goals or objectives during a round of golf. Try to limit your process goals during the round to one or two performance and one or two mental goals. After the round, you can record your statistics.

Don’t make your goals so difficult that you get discouraged fast when you are not even close to achieving them. Make you goals attainable. I worked with a senior tour golfer who was hopeful that if he reached the statistical goals he set for his golf performance, he would have led every statistical category on the Senior PGA Tour.

I don’t want to hold you back from reaching for the stars with your game, but at the same time, I want you to set goals in the short-term that you can manage and achieve. You can always evaluate and later set higher goals as you improve.

Assess and modify your goals often. You can measure performance statistics by recording them during and/or after the round— it’s a personal preference here. You can use a scorecard during the round or the Record of Progress after the round to record your statistics. will say that I would rather you record your stats than record your score and thus be score conscious.

The most commonly recorded statistics are fairways and greens hit in regulation, total putts per round, sand saves, up and down percentage, and birdies per round. You can record many other performance statistics, but I don’t want you to make it too complicated and get lost in statistics. Maybe pick two or three stats you want to focus on and record during the round, and record the others after the round. Use a journal, a Record of Progress, or a computer program to record performance statistics after every round.

Setting and keeping track of mental game goals is also important, although more subjective. In the Record of Progress, there are three important areas to monitor:

- How well you can focus on the process each shot
- Level of emotional control
- Sticking to your pre-shot routine

These goals will change depending on a person’s strengths and weaknesses. You can modify the Record of Progress and use goals that are most relevant for you. For example, maybe having fun and forgetting about score is a more appropriate goal for you at this time.

Here are some examples of other mental game goals:

1. Stay patient with self when mistakes are made
2. Visualize or feel every shot before addressing the ball
3. On every putt, commit to a line before address the ball
4. Pick a target on every shot that is visually obvious
5. Focus on performance goals, not score
See yourself succeeding at your goal. Goals focus your attention on what you want to achieve and that is great. Most good players though, go beyond just setting goals for their golf success; they see themselves achieving their goals. We use a motto in sports psychology that goes like this: “You must first see it and believe it in order to achieve it.” So engrain your goals at a deeper level by visualizing what you want to achieve in golf and truly believing it.

**Evaluate and Revise Your Goals**

If you are failing to meet your goals, it may be that you are pricing in perfection and need to reevaluate. If you are reaching all of your goals easily, it may mean you need to set higher goals for yourself.

Each tournament week you will need to set new goals for practice and performance based on your current weaknesses and strengths. You should ask yourself these questions each week:

- What did I do well in the last tournament?
- What do I need to do better this week?
- How will I get better in practice this week?
- What process goals should I adhere to this week to help me perform better?
- What practice goals will help me prepare for this tournament?

Be sure to set objectives for course preparation, game plan, and warm up routine. Did you study the course; check yardage plates or trees and pick targets off the tees? With this information, did you develop a game plan? Assess how well you followed the game plan that you set before the round. Lastly, did you complete your full warm up routine? Did you get into a confident and focused state of mind before you got to the first tee?

**Wrap-Up**

Improvement involves three important phases.

- First, you must learn some new information (a method, technique, or strategy) that applies to your game. Gaining this knowledge alone is not enough.

- Second, you must then apply the new knowledge to your game by practicing daily, but success it still far away.

- The final, most important ingredient to change and to complete the process, that is, you must commit to getting better each and every day, day after day, week after week, month after month. Without all three phases—Learn, Practice, and Commit, improvement cannot occur.

Set relevant goals for your game, practice in the most effective way, and stay committed to the process of getting better every day!

Setting goals alone will not guarantee success or game improvements. It will help you create a plan for improvement. You then have to follow through on the plan with desire, dedication, hard work, hours and hours of practice, and commitment to your goals.

Quality practice is focused, goal-oriented practice. If you practice the wrong way, you just get good at the wrong thing.

Performance improvement does not happen overnight. I’m often asked how long it takes to make a change. The answer depends on the person and how much time they devote to practice. Most instructors agree that is takes at least 21 days to create a new habit. Others suggest that it takes 3,000 repetitions to form a new habit.
You can’t expect to make significant changes overnight, or in a week for that matter. It’s hard to change habits because when you make a swing change, you have to extinguish the old habit and replace it with the new one. This is harder to do than to learn something new in which you have not formed any bad habits. That’s why children are such good learners; they haven’t had enough time to learn bad habits. But with appropriate short and long-terms goals, you will focus on the correct steps.

Golf is a funny game sometimes. Even though you work harder on you game than ever before, it’s may be hard to see gains and feel like you are playing better. You might be feeling stronger and hitting the ball more consistently, but your scores have not improved. “I’m practicing more than ever, but I don’t seem to be shooting better scores” many players say in frustration. My first response to this player is that to play well, you have to do more than just hit the ball well. The elements of scoring—putting, chipping, sand play, course management, and mental toughness—are the keys to playing better golf.

As you advance to the next level, from a ten to a five handicap for example, it’s becomes harder and harder to make improvements in performance. The learning curve is much steeper for a beginner. A beginner can see daily improvements from practice. The gains a five-handicap player makes appear smaller, occur more slowly, and are less detectable.

This can be very frustrating for the player who feels fit, is injury-free, and is hitting the ball more consistently. If a performance plateau remains for weeks or even months, a player can get easily discourage. This is when patience, commitment, and dedication to your goals are so important.

You must have the patience to know that all the hard work will pay off eventually. You must stay committed to improving your game on a daily basis. In addition, you must be dedicated to the goals you set for your golf game.

It’s easy to overdo anything in life, especially if you are a perfectionist. The goal of this workbook is not to make you a great practice player; the goal is to help you play better and win by setting relevant goals and working smarter!

Perfectionistic players live for what was presented above because it gives them another task to master. You can burn out on a game you love by maintaining high expectations for yourself and not seeing returns via lower scores.

You will need to rest and —smell the roses along the path to your dreams. All work and no fun makes a dull golf game. Use this information to develop clear, specific, measurable, and relevant goals to improve your golf game. You primary goal should be to play better via smarter practice and focused play, not to become the best practice player that ever lived!
Developing Effective Pregame Routines

Get Psyched - Pregame Mental Strategies

Hall of Fame player Hank Aaron was one of the best hitters in the history of baseball and a model of consistency. When Hank Aaron struggled to get a hit against a particular pitcher, he would go back to the dugout to study that pitcher.

In an interview with Dr. Tom Hanson (1991), Aaron explained that he would also reverse his baseball cap, using the eyelets in the back of the cap to narrow his focus to the pitcher. By reducing distractions from the crowd and the benches, he could concentrate on the pitcher, and visualize getting a hit the next time at bat.

Hank Aaron attributed much of his success in baseball to his mental preparation –both before and during the game. He was not a big advocate of the mechanics of baseball. Instead, he believed that mental preparation and doing his “homework” was the key to becoming a great, consistent hitter year after year.

He was a master at studying the pitcher before games. “I think about how a guy mentally prepares himself to do battle, to go out and face the pitcher. I think so many hitters do not know how to get themselves prepared to play or hit against a pitcher. You have to mentally be prepared to hit against all pitchers.” (Hanson, 1991)

Aaron treated each game differently because he had to face a different pitcher, and this required focus, concentration, preparation and visualization of the pitcher’s “stuff.” “You visualize [pitches]. You see it in your head; you think about it... I used to play every pitcher in my mind before I went to the ballpark. I started getting ready for every game the moment I woke up.” (Aaron & Wheeler, 1991)

Today, the world’s top athletes use pregame rituals or routines to help create the proper mindset for competition and practice. But mental preparation starts a long time before the competition, and involves more than just visualizing a successful performance. Pregame routines instill confidence, focus and a success-oriented mindset when the whistle blows.

In addition, pregame routines should be customized for each athlete, depending on the sport, individual idiosyncrasies, whether the athlete is competing at home or away, and after determining what works for each person.

Two main components of Mental Preparation:

1. Athletes and coaches should launch the mental preparation process days (or even weeks) before competition, which includes learning the strategies that instill greater mental toughness. This is the time to work on your focus, confidence, composure and many other mental game strategies.

2. Athletes must apply specific pregame or pre-competition routines. These routines should incorporate strategies that create the kind of mindset needed right before a competition.

What is Mental Preparation?

Mental preparation is a very broad topic within the arena of sports psychology. It encompasses much of what I do to help athletes find the right mindset to perform well. For example, I teach athletes to develop a pregame or warm up routine that includes various mental game strategies, such as focus, confidence, trust and creating a game plan.
Professional athletes develop and apply specific pregame rituals or routines to instill their winning mindsets. The ultimate goal of mental preparation is to create a mindset that lets you consistently perform up to your capabilities and talents! When you consider the top athletes in the world – Drew Brees, Phil Mickelson, Alex Rodriguez, Kobe Bryant or any Hall of Famer – you’ll notice that consistent performance, year after year, is one hallmark of a champion.

Retired baseball slugger Wade Boggs was asked about his pregame mental preparation. He said that before every game, he used a routine to mentally prepare himself to get hits off the opposing pitcher. “I went into a cocoon about 20 minutes before each game. This was my quiet time, my preparation time. I focused on the pitcher and how he would try to get me out. I would envision getting a hit off the pitcher.”

He would visualize the pitcher and the pitches, while trying to pick up clues as to what the pitcher would throw and when. Mental preparation, he said, helped him to develop a plan at the plate. Boggs developed this mental preparation ritual on his own, without any outside instruction, and it worked for him. He believed that having a game plan for how to hit was key, and that without a plan, it would be very hard to succeed. His plan included the following four objectives:

- Know the opposition—pitcher
- Know what the task at hand is
- Know what the pitcher might throw
- Know how the pitcher will try to get you out

After formulating the plan, Boggs visualized himself carrying out the plan and getting a hit.

“Concentration is the ability to think about nothing at the right time. Focus only on the task at hand. The white ball has to occupy your focus.” - Wade Boggs

Of course, a good mindset doesn't happen by itself. Athletes and coaches must be proactive by applying the same level of dedication to mental conditioning as they do to physical conditioning.

**Six Objectives of Pregame Mental Preparation**

There are several mental preparation strategies that can be applied to pre-competition routines. However, you must always remember the overall aim of your mental preparation and the pregame mindset you’re trying to establish. Overall, your goal is to achieve a focused, confident and trusting mindset prior to competition. Below are the six major objectives you’ll want to accomplish.

1. **To feel prepared and ready to compete.** The feeling of preparation equals confidence. When you feel fully prepared, you feel ready to compete. Most of what athletes and teams do prior to competition (practice, workouts, analyzing the competition or course) helps them feel ready to compete.

2. **To feel confident in one’s skills.** Confidence is the number one objective of your mental preparation. Confidence without strict expectations is my formula for success. As you will learn, confidence can be built in many ways, including from practice, preparation, game plans and the mindsets you maintain.

3. **To focus on execution.** What you focus on prior to competition is critical to your mental game success. I teach athletes where to direct their focus and how to improve their refocusing skills when competing.
4. **To prepare to cope with adversity.** I could probably write an entire book about this often overlooked component of mental preparation. With experience, athletes learn how to cope with any adversity – with situations that could cause them to lose focus, confidence or composure. If you haven’t experienced many adverse situations, you’ll have to anticipate the challenges that might affect your mindset, and develop strategies to cope with each.

5. **To finalize a game plan or strategy.** In most team sports, athletes are given the game plan. However, athletes who participate in individual sports, such as running, golf, tennis and racing, must develop their own plans and strategies.

6. **To fully enter the role of the athlete.** I use this phrase to help athletes make the transition between life and sports. I want athletes to shelve any life challenges or hassles, and learn how to fully focus on competition. Later, I’ll discuss how this applies to your pre-competition preparation.

Although many teams and athletes strive to attain these objectives, some don’t have a system for reaching them. Before I discuss my system for mental preparation, however, let’s focus on the top pregame mental errors you’ll need to avoid.

One of the first tasks is determining which mental errors or self-limiting beliefs are in play. Most self-limiting beliefs or negative attitudes can override the positive effects of mental skills training. For example, if you believe you “always” have trouble catching high pop-ups, this belief will hold you back, because you will act it out. It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**Top 10 Mental Errors**

1. Maintaining strict expectations about your performance. Maintaining high, specific expectations can limit your success – for example, “I must birdie every hole in order to win today.” Identify strict expectations and replace them with process goals or simple objectives that help them focus on the process.

2. Leaving confidence to chance. Many athletes lack self-confidence until the game has already started – until they can make a good play or hit quality shots. You have to learn how to be proactive with your confidence.

3. Letting doubts undermine confidence. Doubt is the opposite of confidence. When you question your ability prior to competition, you erode any confidence you’ve brought to the game.

4. Carrying life’s worries into sports. Some athletes have trouble “shelving” major life events during competition. Whether the issue is a divorce, a term paper or a fight with a boss, one goal of mental preparation is to enter the role of the athlete and temporarily forget about other concerns.

5. Over-training before competition. Perfectionists in individual sports, such as golf and tennis, spend too much time training just prior to competition. This is the equivalent of cramming for an upcoming test. In sports, you never want to cram during the final week before the competition.

6. Getting mired in a practice mentality. This is the extension of cramming for the test in sports. Some perfectionist athletes can’t stop practicing their techniques – even after the competition has started. This leads to analytical behavior and lack of self-trust. Once competition begins, you have to adopt a functional mindset instead of striving for mechanical perfection. Film and stage actors put it this way: you must “be in the moment” instead of concentrating on how to say your lines.

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7. Poor planning or lack of a game plan. You should never enter competition without a game plan, race strategy or course strategy. In team sports, most coaches give you the game plan. On the other hand, individual athletes must develop their own game plans and strategies.

8. Psyching yourself out before entering the fray. This commonly occurs when athletes place too much emphasis on their competitors' prowess, and come to feel they don't “stack up.” This causes your confidence to dwindle, and leaves you too distracted to perform your best.

9. Worry too much about what others think. This is common among athletes who are too self-conscious about what others MIGHT be thinking about their performance. If this sounds like you, then you put too much pressure on yourself because you want to impress others. You play to gain acceptance or approval instead of performing for yourself.

10. Motivated by fear of failure. Fear of failure occurs when athletes are motivated by not losing or not making mistakes – instead of winning. The root causes are complex, but fear of failure usually starts when athletes worry about the potential consequences of failure. There are several secondary issues related to this fear, including anxiety, tension, pregame anxiety, trying too hard and lack of trust – just to mention a few.

The objective here is to understand how you might be sabotaging your performance with ineffective attitudes or poor focus.

The quality of your mental preparation is one thing over which you have total control. Do not leave mental preparation to chance or external forces that you can't control, such as your opponents, the conditions of the course or track, weather conditions or the level of officiating. Now that the physical training is complete, you should be ready to enter the competitive mindset. Be proactive and take personal responsibility for your mental game or mindset before every competition!

**Pregame Attitude Quotient (PAQ)**

Respond to the following statements using a scale of 1-10, 1 being never and 10 being always. Write the number (1-10) that best describes your situation next to the statement. For the most useful results, be as honest as possible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Pregame Attitude Statement</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Never</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>3</td>
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**Rating Pregame Attitude Statement**

- I have high expectations before I compete, and get frustrated when I do not realize them.
- My pregame confidence depends on having a good warm up or performance before the start of the game.
- I entertain pregame doubts about my ability or my team’s ability.
- I think about other problems in my life while I compete.
- I train harder prior to important competitions – i.e., —cram for the test.
- I take my practice mindset into competition, and think about technique in the game.
- I do not decide on a game plan or strategy for competition.
- I compare myself to my competitors before competition, and get psyched out.
- I worry what others will think about my game or performance before I compete.
- I worry about the consequences of failing and not playing my best before I start the game.

**Overall Rating**
PAQ Scoring:
- If you scored 10-35, you have a healthy pregame attitude.
- If you scored 36-70, you need to work on your pregame attitude.
- If you scored 71-100, you need a lot of work on your pregame attitude.

Mental Prep Starts Before Game Day

Mental preparation can start up to a week before competition and continue up until the warm up prior to competition. However, mental preparation should be an ongoing process of improving and refining mental strategies that will instill a positive mindset. In fact, everything I teach athletes can come under the heading of mental preparation.

Don’t wait until the last minute to start your mental preparation program. Some athletes contact me in a mild state of panic two weeks prior to a big competition, hoping for a mental tune up. Although this section of the book focuses on developing your pregame routines, mental training is an ongoing process that can start in the off-season and continue through the end of the season.

When you begin mental preparation prior to competition depends on your motivation, sport, and amount of training. Because you may respond better to one mental preparation plan than your teammate, allow for individual differences. Some athletes respond better by shutting out external distractions on game day and focusing on getting ready to compete.

However, other athletes may do better by starting to get psyched to play during the pregame routine. One note here: You do not want to get too juiced up prior to competition that you spend all your mental energy. Super Bowl Champions New England Patriots used two weeks preparing a game plan to prepare for Super Bowl XXXIX. However, in sports like baseball that play many games during the season, they can’t spend days preparing for an opponent.

Prepping Your Game Plan

Regardless of which sport you play, you should have a “plan of attack.” In most team sports, coaches prepare game plans to help the team perform well against the competition. Sometimes, this process starts weeks before a big game, by scouting the opposing team and developing a plan to exploit weaknesses.

A game plan is composed of strategies and tactics designed to give the team (or individual athlete) the best chance of winning. In team sports, a game plan usually includes the plays the team might select to run, the strategy a tennis player applies to beat an opponent based on his strengths and the opponent’s weaknesses, or a baseball player’s strategy at the plate based on previous experience with the pitcher.

The purpose here is not to discuss specific game strategies for various sports, but to help you be aware that developing a strategy is highly recommended, and should be part of your mental preparation prior to a game.

Examples of Game Plans

Tennis star Andre Agassi talked about his game plan during the 2005 US Open when he played his way into the championship match, but lost a tough match against Roger Federer, who was then ranked number one in the world.

Agassi’s strategy was to exploit the weaker parts of his opponent’s game, so that he would become frustrated.
Agassi did this well during the match against Federer by trying to take advantage of Federer's backhand, which was considered a weaker stroke than his forehand (Federer does not have any real weaknesses, but his backhand is probably not as strong as his forehand shot). The tactic worked very well in the second set, and part of the third set, because this was the first time Federer looked lost or frustrated in the tournament.

The New England Patriots worked on a game plan for two weeks before Super Bowl XXXIX to beat Philadelphia Eagles 24-21. Patriots coach Bill Belichick is known as one of the best coaches in the NFL for designing offensive game plans and defensive schemes, which some experts believe have helped his team win super bowls even without the most talented group of players.

During the week before Super Bowl XXXIX, Tom Brady called Charlie Weis (the Patriot's offensive coordinator) every night to go over the game plan. Weis said that Tom Brady's obsession with the game plan was becoming a “pain in the butt,” but this dedication to preparation and planning was one reason the Eagles had so much trouble slowing down Brady and the Patriots.

Part of the offensive plan was to start slow, be patient, and test the Eagles defense for possible weaknesses. The Pats offense is one of the best at adjusting to various defensive schemes and taking whatever the defense gives up.

**The Game Plan Plays to Your Strengths**

A game plan should be based on your strengths and weaknesses. In golf, for example, I encourage you to create a plan for the course. It includes how best to play each hole, which clubs to use off the tee, targets, par five strategy, and when to aim at the pins. The best option is to set a game plan before entering competition.

Under pressure in the game, athletes don't always make smart decisions. For example, some athletes let momentum go to their heads, and become overaggressive.

As an individual athlete, you might start by reviewing previous game plans or strategies you've used successfully. In the past, what has helped you take control of your confidence going into the game or race?

Feeling prepared to beat an opponent or tackle a golf course requires confidence. You should also consult with your coach or mental game expert to discuss your plan, which can include both performance and mental game goals.

A racecar driver might develop a specific plan for running the track. This plan may include the lines to take for each turn, when to throttle down and break into turns and guidelines for a passing situation. You can do the same for your sport. Here are some general guidelines:

**Setting Objectives and Your Game Plan**

The game plan should include one or two simple objectives to help you focus on execution only. I call simple objectives “process goals” and there are two types:

1. Performance goals could include hitting a certain number of greens in regulation (golf), carrying good corner speed at every turn (racing), and increasing first serve percentage (tennis). These process goals help you focus on what's important to your success and direct your attention to important cues.

2. Mental goals could include committing to the reads on the green (golf), being patient about passing (racing), or visualizing a good serve every time (tennis). Mental goals help you focus on what's important and to stay in the “zone.”

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Process goals help to de-emphasize results. As a mental game coach, I encourage students to pick one or two process goals from each category – performance and mental.

How do you determine which process goals to use?

I recommend that you decide which performance areas need improvement based on your last competition. As a tennis player, for example, maybe your first serve percentage was only 40% in the last match. Therefore, you might decide to focus on achieving a 55% first serve percentage.

If, as a golfer, you were undecided on the greens and had difficulty committing to a read during your last round, an appropriate process goal would be to increase your level of commitment for every putt – to be more decisive.

**Checklist for Your Game Plan**

Below are a few tasks involved in developing the game plan:

- For individual sports, evaluate your strengths and your opponent's strengths and weaknesses. Which strategies can you employ to exploit your strengths and your opponent's weaknesses (as Agassi did in the example above)?

- Study the course or track, and decide on the best targets to hit or lines to take. For example, I advise my Motocross students to study the track conditions during practice, and then watch other races to determine the best lines for each section of the track.

- Develop a team philosophy that guides the team and defines roles – for example, “with improved teamwork everyone accomplishes more.”

- Develop a guide for a race plan. For example, triathletes must prepare for three sections of the race: swim, bike and run, create strategy for each section. Here’s a simple example: Feel effortless during the swim, use drafting during the bike to save energy for the run, and run quietly and smoothly.

- If you coach team sports, use scouting reports and analyze your team’s strengths.

- Pick one or two process goals (also called simple objectives) that will focus your mind (or the team's attention) on execution. I ask my golf students to set process goals related to playing the game one shot at a time – for example, by picking a target before every shot.

- Visualize the game plan unfolding the way you want.

- Prepare to be flexible and make strategic or tactical changes when necessary – for instance, when weather changes or opponents adapt.

**Match Practice Conditions to Competitive Conditions**

How you practice is critical to success in competition. One goal for practice should be to simulate the conditions under which you'll compete. Why do this include this strategy under mental preparation?

Although this concept ties into your physical practice, it also contributes to your confidence once you enter the competition. We call this simulation training or (in non-technical language) dress rehearsals.
Below are some examples of how to apply this concept:

- **Practice under conditions that simulate what you will encounter next.** For example, Motocross racers have to learn how to race well on different types of tracks with various surfaces. Some track surfaces are sandy and slow while others are hard and fast. If a racer's next race is on a hard and fast track, he should practice on a similar surface leading up to the race. This is smart practice, and helps build your confidence.

- **Practice the areas of your game that will improve performance.** For example, every golf course presents different challenges. Some courses demand accurate driving, others require accurate approach shots to the greens. Most golfers will study the course and decide on a game plan. This allows golfers to concentrate on those areas that will lead to good performance on the course. Prior to winning the 2002 Masters Tournament, Tiger Woods practiced his putting on his home practice course, Isleworth Country Club, but the greens were cut to match the speed of the greens at the Master's Tournament.

- **Perform a “dress rehearsal” prior to competition.** Many teams apply this strategy using inter-squad scrimmages. A good rehearsal is done under conditions that simulate the actual competition, so gymnastic teams use, pressure sets during practice to simulate what athletes might experience. They perform their routines with crowd noise, an audience, judges and other distractions. This helps athlete’s acclimate to the distractions that attend real world competition.

**Stuff Happens! Prepare to Manage Distractions**

Another mental preparation strategy, which you can use long before the competition, is to anticipate probable challenges and develop coping reactions to handle these situations. Sport competitions are not played in a vacuum. Stuff happens. For this reason, you need to be prepared when stuff happens to you. Your goal is to react with composure when events happen that could distract you, anticipate several distractions that may occur.

Examples of challenges to anticipate include difficult weather conditions, unfair officiating, rude spectators, psych-out attempts from competitors, poor play, bad luck and unexpected equipment problems. Prepare to cope with any challenge, instead of being surprised by various obstacles or distractions.

Step one is to anticipate unexpected events, distractions or emotional triggers, which may present challenges during competition. The second step is to develop a coping response for each challenge.

This gives you a mental edge, knowing that you have prepared yourself to react confidently when challenged. Anticipation and coping is a critical part of the mental preparation package.

During the 2003 US Open, a streaker ran onto the course and distracted Jim Furyk, who was in the middle of the tournament. This could have cost Furyk the US Open title if he hadn't known how to refocus on his game and cope with an unanticipated event.

To mentally prepare for any situation, athletes might begin by addressing the following questions:

1. What are five situations in which you might become distracted and lose your focus – e.g., forgetting to bring a spare racquet to the tennis match or breaking a string on your racquet?
2. List five instances that might cause you to become upset or frustrated during competition.
3. Which events would distract you prior to a game, during warm up or during competition – e.g., a weather delay?
4. What other challenging events might disrupt your game, such as having your equipment break during warm up?
Looking into your “crystal ball” to anticipate potential challenges is only half the strategy. The most important task is to develop a coping strategy for each of the above scenarios. The goal is to react with confidence, focus and composure.

The Three R’s for Refocusing
1. Recognize—the distraction or stressor
2. Regroup—think “stop” and take a deep breath
3. Refocus—narrow focus to the task-relevant cues

How the Three R’s Work:
1. The first step in coping with a distraction is to RECOGNIZE that you are focusing on thoughts or cues that prevent you from performing “in the now.” You might recognize, for example, that you’re thinking about possible outcomes: “What if they score on me and we lose the game?”

2. Next, interrupt your current thought process and take control of your focus. REGROUP by instructing yourself to stop focusing on unimportant cues. “Stop thinking about whether we’ll win or lose! That won't help me right now!”

3. Finally, bring your mind into the present, and REFOCUS on the task in front of you. Ask yourself a simple question, such as: “What should I focus on RIGHT NOW to perform my best?”

The primary goal of the three R’s is to help refocus when your mind is sidetracked. You don’t want the distraction to run on for a few plays, shots or laps. It’s OK to lose your focus momentarily – it happens to the most focused athletes during a game. However, mentally prepared players recognize when they’ve become distracted, and quickly refocus on playing in the here and now.

Challenging and Changing Your Thoughts
Reframing is another effective and simple method for helping you mentally prepare to cope with distractions, doubts and negative thoughts.

The technique used by mental game coaches to help athletes turn setbacks into opportunities and turn doubts into confidence-boosting thoughts. Every athlete and coach should learn how to reframe challenges, negative thoughts or doubts to help athletes mentally prepare. Reframing doesn't cause athletes to always expect mental challenges, but it helps them cope with challenges more effectively when they do occur.

Some of history’s great coaches have been able to put a positive spin on any situation to help the team maintain a healthy attitude. That’s what reframing is all about.

Dan Jensen was a four-time participant in the Olympics as a member of the US speed skating team. In the 1988 Olympics, he was favored to win the gold medal in the 1000-meter event. He fell in both the 500- and 1000-meter events after learning that his sister had lost her battle with Leukemia. In the 1998 Olympics, a reporter asked if he was aware that he would be recognized as the best skater to not win a gold medal if he failed to win that year.

Jansen’s response: “That is one way to look at it, but I choose to look at it another way. With this being my fourth Olympic games, I have also had the opportunity to become one of the most successful Olympians of all time.” He was a strong believer in the notion that how you perceive any situation can determine your success. In Jensen’s final Olympic event, he won the gold.
Another great example of reframing occurred just before the 1977 Orange Bowl when Lou Holtz's Arkansas team lost three players (who were responsible for 78 percent of offensive production) on rule violations. His team was a 24-point underdog three days before the game. In his book, Winning Every Day, Coach Holtz said that the feeling in the locker room was one of defeat. So he held a team meeting to discuss the reasons why they could win.

Holtz helped his team focus on their existing strengths. The players discussed at least three reasons why they could win:

1. The defense was still intact, and was rated #1 in the country;
2. they had a powerful offensive line, as well as the best punter and place kicker in the country; and
3. The quarterback was a terrific competitor, and would elevate their play. Thanks to the meeting, the players' attitudes changed: they now believed they could win the Orange Bowl, which they did, beating Oklahoma 31-6.

They won because Holtz helped the team change their perceptions of themselves. With free will, you always have a choice. You can spend time thinking about why you'll lose or about why you can win.

You, too, can learn to become a master of the reframe. A baseball player can dwell on the fact that he is 0-4 and can't get a hit today, or he can believe that he's over-due for a hit. Great hitters fail 70% of the time at the plate. Great putters in golf miss many more putts than they make. How the best athletes deal with failure is what sets them apart. You always have a choice! You can choose to dwell on doubts or the negative, but this will sabotage your confidence and keep you stuck in a rut.

Below is an example of how reframing worked with one golfer. First, the athlete was asked to give a list of the top doubts that occur during a round of golf. Second, the athlete was told how to reframe these doubts in a way that improved confidence. The athlete's goal was to have a prepared response for whatever doubts occurred.

**Recognizing and Reframing Doubts**

**Doubt Reframe Examples**

- **Doubt - Have I practiced enough to play well in this event?**
  - **Reframe - I know you have practiced enough. Focus on balance and tempo, and let the results flow from good execution.**

- **Doubt - Have I prepared enough for this tournament?**
  - **Reframe - You prepare your game more than anyone; now you must trust your game and focus on execution.**

- **Doubt - My bunker game is really weak; I should avoid the bunkers today.**
  - **Reframe - I enjoy the challenge of hitting good bunker shots; focus on your mini-goals for the day. Think about where you want the ball to go.**

- **Doubt - Is my swing going to be there? Will the ball go to my target?**
  - **Reframe - I have a great swing, and I believe in my training. Focus on hitting fairways and making birdie opportunities.**

- **Doubt - Will I be able to trust my swing today?**
  - **Reframe - You work hard enough, so you can trust your swing today; you must now focus on the process of taking one shot at a time.**
• Doubt - Will my game be consistent today?
• Reframe - My game is consistent when I apply a consistent routine. Play one shot at a time and focus on the process.

• Doubt - Am I going to have any big numbers today? I need to avoid big numbers.
• Reframe – Never mind avoiding big numbers, results or labeling shots; think about execution, not score.

You can enhance the above reframing strategy by taking the process to the next level of learning. A good way to learn your reframes is to practice them in your mind.

You do this by mentally rehearsing the scenarios in your mind and using the determined reframes to cope with each doubt. This makes it easier to transfer your coping responses to competition. You should also begin to use your reframes when you're in a practice situation.

Now it's your turn to practice reframing your doubts. Use the workspace on the next page to help you identify and reframe common doubts you have prior to competition.

**Get Psyched with Pregame Routines**
Up to this point, I have been discussing mental preparation techniques that you can do anytime before competition. However, I also teach athletes to incorporate mental preparation into their pre-competition routines or pregame warm ups. The three overriding objectives for mental preparation are to achieve full confidence, focus, and the proper mindset to trust in your training.

**Identify Expectations that Sabotage Performance**

Picture this scenario: Lisa starts the tennis match with grandiose expectations about her performance. Her main expectation is to win the match. “OK, not a bad thought,” you think. Expectation is like confidence, right?

Wrong!

Unfortunately, Lisa’s expectations go well beyond winning. They include performance expectations such as not making any errors, not giving up a set, and hitting every serve at the target. On the surface, these expectations may seem positive, but they might well get Lisa into trouble.

All expectations, high or low, present problems for athletes. That's because expectations and confidence are two different things. Most athletes think that if you expect to win, then you are confident in your ability to win, but this isn't true. Strict expectations about your performance often cause you to focus on results, and can keep you stuck in a comfort zone.

Let me explain.

With success, comes confidence. However, success also brings high expectations. In 2004, there was a NASCAR driver who had achieved great success at every level of his career. As he won more and rose to the top of his sport, his performance expectations also rose. His attitude was such that if the race didn't go exactly according to plan (according to his expectations), he would get frustrated, lose his composure and get upset with the race team. In most cases, high expectations only cause you to become unglued when you don't match them.

When I talk about expectations, I refer to the strict demands you place on your performance.
Instead of generating confidence, expectations become a desperate need for athletes – “I MUST finish in the top 10 this week, or the race is a failure.” If you are familiar with my philosophy about mental strength coaching, you know that focusing on results is not the right mindset.

Expectations also cause you to become very judgmental about your performance. You constantly assess how you are doing verses how you expect to do: “Am I going to pitch a no-hitter today?” These results-oriented judgments distract you from the process.

**Park Your Expectations in the Lot**

Identifying and removing your expectations is a good place to start your mental preparation. I ask athletes to acknowledge expectations before they begin their pregame warm up. In this step, you try to acknowledge any expectations you might have about your performance or the team's success.

Performance expectations come in many forms, but most often are related to results, such as winning a race. Expectations can also relate to your personal statistics, such as scoring a certain number of points in basketball. When people don't match their expectations, frustration, anger or feelings of failure can emerge.

Here are a few questions to help you flush out strict performance expectations:

- What results do you demand of yourself before the competition even starts?
- What personal statistics, such as points per game, do you feel you should achieve based on past performances, and would you be upset or frustrated if you did not reach these stats?
- Do you maintain unrealistic goals for your performance before competitions? In which areas do you have to be perfect?
- Do you try to live up to other people's expectations? What expectations do you adopt from others – parents, coaches or teammates?
- Do expectations about your scoring (or your team's scoring) limit you when you exceed these expectations, keeping you stuck in a comfort zone?
- Do you generalize today about how you SHOULD perform based on past performances?
- Do you engage in name-calling with yourself or maintain negative personal descriptions such as – I'm a choker, which influence your confidence?
- Are you easily frustrated when you don't perform the way you think you should perform? What are the ways you think you should perform?

Once you flush out your performance expectations, you have to commit to parking these expectations when you perform. I know ... easier said than done!

If you eliminate or avoid expectations, what should you think about?

One option is to replace expectations with process goals. Process goals focus your attention on execution instead of results. Process goals are changeable and not as absolute as expectations. You strive toward goals, but that doesn't mean you have to achieve them. Goals focus you on what's important, but do not demand perfection from you.
Expectations often demand perfection, which if not realized can make you unravel. Goals are more flexible and help you to focus on the process of execution. For example, a golfer can set a mini-goal, such as hitting a certain number of fairways or greens in regulation.

Four steps for identifying and negating expectations:

1. Identify any self-limiting expectations about your performance prior to competition.
2. Commit to throwing away these expectations when you compete.
3. Identify simple process goals to focus your attention on the here and now instead of results and statistics.
4. In competition, refocus your attention on the current play, shot or routine at the moment you start to become judgmental about your performance.

Too much focus on results breeds tension, anxiety and sometimes doubt.

You must choose to focus on the process of execution. The main goal is to decide what should fill your concentration during competition. One of the most important principles in sports psychology is the ability to concentrate in the present (the here and now). This requires you to concentrate on the mental cues that allow you to execute a play, run, swing, etc.

The first task is to identify what the important focal cues (also called —task-relevant cues) are for your sport. These are the thoughts, images, feelings, targets, external stimuli, etc. that should fully occupy your mind during execution.

Many coaches don’t understand this basic principle of concentration, so they don’t tell you to focus on any particular cues.

In order to stay grounded in the present moment, a swimmer needs to identify what the important cues are to perform at their best. Here is a sample pre-race routine that a swimmer can focus on the following cues:

- Let go of the last race
- Adjust goggles/cap
- Loosen up arms
- Stretch
- Reaffirm your objective for the start.
- Rehearse a part of the swim
- Create a plan for the race

Next, identify irrelevant cues or distractions, which have nothing to do with focusing on execution. Here are a few examples of task-irrelevant cues in swimming:

- Thinking about what you don’t want to do
- Thinking about not making mistakes
- Thinking about a past event or meet
- Focusing on the lane next to you
- Focusing on a time you think you need
- Thinking about that term paper
Selective attention is the ability to narrowly focus on relevant information and filter out unwanted information, including external and internal distractions or irrelevant thoughts. As humans, we have the ability to fill our attention with the demands of the task and disregard information that is not related to successful execution.

Most athletes have the ability to concentrate. Successful concentration is about your ability to focus on what’s important, given the demands of the competitive environment.

**Four Steps to a Process Focus**

There are four guidelines to help athletes apply a process focus and achieve a zone focus. These steps may sound very basic and easy to understand, but they are much harder to consistently apply in practice and competition.

1. Identify the cues that are relevant for successful execution for each task in your sport (e.g., tennis serve vs. return of serve). What do you need to focus on to achieve successful execution? What is not relevant to performing each task? This will help you filter out the cues that will hinder your success.

2. Immerse yourself in the task-relevant cues you identified in step one. You have the power to selectively attend to what’s important and filter out items that aren’t relevant. (This is where preparatory routines might come into play for some of you. A routine will guide you toward becoming mentally absorbed in the task instead of getting tangled in distractions.)

3. Recognize when you are off-task, distracted or outside your normal routine. This means reviewing your past performances to determine how and when your focus wandered or broke down (e.g., external distraction, doubt, indecision, etc.). Prepare to respond by refocusing.

4. Create a strategy to help you refocus on the relevant cues of the task. This is the most important step in dealing with distractions and breakdowns in focus.

Your first step to focusing in the here and now is identifying what is relevant to successful execution of a task, such as a golf putt. For example:

- Assessing the green
- Reading the green/slope
- Picking a line
- Taking a practice stroke
- Visualizing the putt go on line
- Aiming the putter
- Setting the body square to line
- Thinking about hitting the target
- Focusing on the speed of putt

Although I’ve listed only one task – putting – you can use this drill for several tasks: for a drive, fairway shot, chipping, sand play, etc.

In team sports, you can define what is relevant for each player’s position. You’d want each player to know his duties and to focus on performing those duties. Thus, you would define the task cues for quarterback, lineman, receiver, etc. Of course, the cues for each position may change, depending on the player’s specific assignment.
If you coach a team sport, determine the assignments and cues for each position in the preseason or long before the first game of the season. Then, when you get closer to the first game, you can remind each player of the important cues.

Once you begin the competition, the next step is to immerse yourself in the cues that help you stay grounded in the present. If you get ahead of yourself and start worrying about outcomes, stop and refocus your attention on what is relevant to successful execution. To help you do this, I suggest you spend a few minutes in your pre-competition warm up thinking about one or two goals you want to accomplish.

**Set Process Goals to Stay on Task**

One of the best methods I know to help athletes let go of outcomes and focus on the present moment is to give them simple process goals to focus on during the game. If working the process brings desired results, you should put aside the outcome of the competition. Instead, ask yourself what you need to do moment-by-moment or play-by-play to perform your best.

Note: the term “goals” isn't the best descriptor, because it implies an evaluation about how well you did (or are doing) to reach those goals. A more appropriate term is “objectives.”

**Summary of Process Goals:**

- **Performance Goals:** goals based on something you can measure such as number of rebounds or blocked shots.
- **Mental Goals:** goals based on your mental game that help you focus on one play, shot or routine at a time, such as committing to a plan or visualizing your pitch before you start the wind up.

Once again, I only use process goals to help you become immersed in the ingredients of the task. Although it's rewarding to reach your goals, I don't want you to evaluate or judge whether you’re on track to reach them. If you do this, you are not focusing on the process. The pre-competition routine is an excellent time to decide on process goals to focus on during competition.

**Pregame Mental Preparation Tip #1**

Don’t let your mind get ahead of the first play of the game, first shot of the match or the start of the race. You should have a game plan or race strategy, but keep your mind grounded in the first task of the day – the tip-off, kick-off, 1st tee shot, start from the blocks or first pitch of the game!

**Take Control of Your Confidence**

Self-confidence is the number one asset for performance. Most of the mental strength strategies revolve around having high levels of confidence.

**What is self-confidence?**

Confidence is the belief that you can and will perform well. For the most part, confidence develops from performing well in the past and knowing you can perform well again. The opposite of confidence is doubt, indecision or fear. Ninety-five percent of low self-confidence is caused by the following saboteurs, which usually crop up before competition:

1. Lack of past results. If confidence is based on past success, and you do not perceive that you are improving or getting results, confidence suffers.

2. Fragile self-confidence. Many athletes are prone to roller coaster confidence levels. Their confidence dips and peaks with each shot, pitch, routine or play.
3. Disqualifying the positive. Some athletes ignore the positive and focus on what they are doing wrong. Athletes with high expectations, who never feel like they match these expectations, feel a sense of failure.

4. Waiting to feel confident. Some athletes can never take self-confidence into competition because they need immediate results to feel confident. Thus, something positive must happen before they can feel confident in their abilities.

5. Negative self-talk or doubt. Because doubt is the opposite of confidence, doubts or negative self-talk will undermine your confidence.

6. Self-psych out or intimidation. Some athletes sabotage their own confidence by making comparisons to competitors and making assumptions about their ability to compete. This is caused by focusing too much on the other team or opponents.

Mental preparation and confidence should go hand in hand.

Your goal is to do everything in your power to develop a confident mindset and fight off the internal demons of doubt and indecision.

**Identify and Cut off Pregame Doubts**

Be aware of when you start to doubt your (or the team's) ability to perform well. Sometimes, doubts can subtle and hard to detect.

In the past, you might have ignored them, or maybe you were so used to self-doubt that you thought nothing of it. Subtle doubts lead you to question your ability prior to competition. Some common statements are:

- Did we practice the right plays?
- Can we play well in these weather conditions?
- Do I have the right strategy to beat my opponent?
- When will it be my turn to win?
- Have I practiced the right aspects of my game?

In most cases, doubts are not so subtle. Instead, they directly undermine your confidence with less-than-optimal thinking:

- I can’t beat this opponent.
- I don’t have the ability to play professionally.
- No matter how hard I practice, I never improve.
- The other team is much stronger and faster than us.
- I never perform well against this opponent.

To make effective changes in your thinking, you must become aware of doubts, subtle or not so subtle. The next step is to turn doubts (reframe them) into statements of positive action and confidence.

Use the Three R's formula to help recognize and reframe doubts:

1. Recognize the doubt – be aware when you're not thinking confidently.
2. Reframe the doubt – challenge the thought.
3. Replace the doubt with a productive thought.
The process for reframing your doubts works like this:

1. Recognize the doubt: “Have I practiced the right aspects of my game to win this match?”
   - STOP! This is not a good thought to have before the match!
2. Reframe the doubt: “I’ve worked harder than anyone in practice.”
3. Replace with a productive thought: “I am fully prepared to play my best game today, since I’ve
   worked hard on all aspects of my game!”

If this strategy proves difficult, play a game called role reversal with a teammate or coach. Put yourself
in the shoes of a coach.

For example, if you were acting like a very positive coach, how would you reframe and replace the
doubt? What would you tell a teammate if he or she voiced the same doubt to you? Most of athletes are
very good at playing this game, so you should pick this up quickly. (It helps to use role reversal prior to
game day.)

Here’s the trick: You must really mean what you say to yourself! You must truly believe in the new and
productive thought instead of just substituting positive words for negative ones. You can use this
strategy for pregame doubts, as well as doubts that may pop up during competition.

**Pregame Mental Preparation Tip #2**
Do not wait until game time to decide how to reframe your doubts. Recall the last time you had some
doubts prior to competition, and list these on a piece of paper. Practice reframing these doubts, so
you’ll be ready to use the Three R’s when necessary.

**Dictate your confidence**
Confidence is a mindset over which you have control. The most common mistake athletes make is
leaving confidence up to chance. Many athletes rely on immediate results to generate confidence. They
refuse to let themselves feel confident until something positive happens that day.

The objective is to proactively elicit thoughts and feelings of confidence, rather than waiting for
confidence to happen by chance. How do you elicit positive feelings?

One way is to view confidence in the long-term. How many years have you been training for your
sport? That is exactly how many years you’ve been developing confidence. You’ve earned the right to
be confident!

Confidence builds from years of practice and competition, not just the previous game, yesterday's
practice or the last play. You should have plenty of confidence-building successes to draw upon.

The question to ask is: What thoughts help me feel confident? You have two choices to make prior to
any competition. Confident athletes choose to think confidently. Athletes who lack confidence choose
to get lost in doubt. You can draw confidence from several areas, including belief in your ability and
work ethic, the ability to prepare mentally and physically for competition, and past successes.

Ask yourself the following positive questions to boost confidence:

- What recent success will help me feel confident today? Review this success.
- What makes our team stronger today? What makes me a stronger competitor than today’s
  opponent?
- What superior physical talents (strength, speed, coordination, tempo, etc.) do I possess that
  support this confidence?
- How does my work ethic and training support my confidence?
- Do I have the right equipment to give me confidence?

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Can I draw confidence from the coaching I receive?
Do people in my life support me in my sport, and does that give me confidence?

**Be Your Own Best Coach with Positive Self-talk**

One strategy for taking control of your confidence involves positive self-talk.

Every person carries on an internal dialogue (self-talk), which can be positive—"I will run well today"—or negative—"I hope I don't embarrass myself."

It's easy to ignore someone else's criticism, but harder to forget self-criticism. Therefore, your task is to prepare three to five self-talk statements, similar to affirmations that will boost your confidence before or during competition.

Start by reviewing recent strong performances, and develop a list of confidence-enhancing statements, such as:

- I am looking forward to playing great tennis today.
- I am going to nail my first basket of the game.
- Crush the ball right at the target in the fairway.
- I thrive on playing tough competitors.
- No one can keep up with me on the track; I'm unbeatable.
- We'll beat them with our teamwork and talent.

Team slogans or mottos are a form of group self-talk. They describe the team in a very positive light to give the members feelings of confidence.

The most historic motto in sports was recited by Vince Lombardi, “Winning isn't everything, the desire to win is the only thing.” (Later, the Library of Congress credits college football coach Red Sanders for this quote.) Notre Dame football team just before heading out onto the field, players touch or bang on a team sign titled, “Play Like A Champion Today”. This motto reinforces a powerful attitude the players want to apply during the game.

Earlier, I discussed how to cut off doubts before they fester and drain your confidence. The same routine can be used for negative self-talk. You have to choose self-talk that's positive and helpful, so be aware when your self-talk turns negative.

When negative self-talk encroaches on your thinking, change the negative statement to a positive one. For example, change the negative self-statement, "You really performed poorly in warm up" to, "You don't have to win warm ups. Your game will elevate when you start the competition." Practice changing your negative self-talk to confidence-enhancing thoughts on paper – before taking the field, court or course. You'll want a ready-to-use strategy once the action starts.

**Use Mental Imagery to Enhance Confidence**

I believe that visualization is an under utilized skill in sports performance. People unfamiliar with mental strength coaching think that all we do is teach athletes visualization and goals setting, which is far from the truth. Most athletes already use and apply mental imagery to some extent, but most if it not effective.

Mentally rehearsing a performance is something many athletes perform naturally, but I think that younger athletes especially can benefit from a more structured approach to the rehearsals.
The three common applications of mental rehearsal are:
  - Technical practice
  - Pregame imagery
  - Review of your game plan.

The idea is to simply picture yourself (for visual performers) or feel yourself (kinesthetic performers) executing an ideal jump shot, pitch, shot or race in your upcoming event. The theory of mental imagery is that you program the pathways for your body to successfully execute. The rehearsal can be conducted during your pregame prep, during the game to help you stay focused, and after the game to assess your performance.

You can also use mental imagery or rehearsal to review or solidify your game plan. Here, you simply rehearse the plan you intend to use during the game. This is an excellent way to heighten your focus on a game plan, so when you are performing it feels like déjà vu.

Preparing for an upcoming competition is one of the most important uses of mental rehearsal, and you can use the method in several ways.

Some examples are:

1. The night before a game, a baseball player might mentally rehearse the pitcher's stuff (anticipating pitches and his release of the ball) to visualize how he'll succeed at the plate. The great Hank Aaron attributed much of his success to this type of preparation.

2. A racecar driver might rehearse the lines he will take on the track in real time, and feel the movements of the car during the race.

3. Before a round, a golfer might rehearse his strategy for playing the course by seeing in his mind's eye the targets and holes he will play.

4. A Motocross racer, just prior to going to the start line, might mentally rehearse the gate drop and getting to the hole shot (first turn) ahead of the other riders.

5. A gymnast might visualize her beam routine, and feel the parts of the routine just prior to mounting the apparatus.

6. Just before getting into the start position, a shooter might visualize the path he will take to hit all targets in the shortest amount of time.

Research in sports performance suggests that athletes follow certain guidelines to make mental imagery or rehearsal a more effective performance enhancement tool:

1. Use a first-person perspective. Imagine what you will experience when playing the game (this is also called an internal perspective). You want to see and sense your body's movements just as you will when competing. Visualize what you will ideally see and do during the game.

2. Tap into dominant learning style. Not all athletes are visual performers. Some learn and perform better using kinesthetic imagery (physical sensations or feelings). Don't force yourself to use imagery that doesn't suit your dominant learning style. Athletes hear the term visualization so often that they assume everyone can (and should) see images in their mind, but this is not the case.
3. Bigger is better. The more you crank up the "volume" on the images, sounds and feelings you're visualizing, the deeper the impact they have on your nervous system and memory. Increase the size or the images you see. For example, recall a time when you performed well. Picture a successful section of your performance or game. Increase the size of the images and note the impact on you.

4. Make the images brighter. Brighter is better. Focus back to your original image. Now make it bigger and brighter.

5. Make the sounds louder. Louder is better. Focus back to your original image. Now make the images bigger and brighter, and make the sounds louder.

6. Make the feelings more powerful. Intensify the feelings. Feel the confidence, effortlessness and enjoyment you felt when you were playing great.

Bigger, brighter, closer, more life-like imagery will amplify the effects of the images. If you want to program yourself for a great performance, visualize it big, bright and close.

You can integrate your pregame mental imagery any time before the game, including when you're traveling, getting dressed in the locker room (as Boggs did), or during parts of your pregame warm up or stretching routine. The key is to develop a pregame routine in which you use pre-competition imagery in the same way.

**Mental Imagery or Mental Rehearsal Audios**

Similar to guided imagery, mental imagery or rehearsal tapes usually feature:

- A short period of relaxation followed by
- An imagery session in which the person or group is guided through the imagery exercise by an audiotape.

Each audio should be customized for the individual athlete. You can record your own voice (using a written script) describing the feelings and images you had during an outstanding performance.

Sometimes, I even include the athlete's favorite music (or energizing music) in the background, but you don't have to get this fancy.

Mastery imagery tapes come from the science of cybernetics. Cybernetics explains how the brain programs the body to perform (similar to the way a computer is programmed).

With each new experience, a new response pattern in the brain is created or strengthened. These stored patterns can be –replayed when an experience is recalled. Helping athletes to recall successful past performances via imagery tapes may help to improve performance in similar situations.

Using imagery audios depends on personal preference and on the athlete's belief in the use of guided imagery for performance enhancement. The imagery audio should be customized to the person's personal preferences and dominant learning style.

The goal of mastery imagery audio is to help you mentally prepare for competition by recalling successful performances, enhancing confidence and improving focus. An imagery tape will typically include the following phases:

1. A short period of relaxation (5-10 minutes)
2. Three or four positive affirmations or goals
3. A guided imagery session (10-20 minutes)
Writing the Mastery Imagery Script
Start by identifying and listing a set of feelings, thoughts, images and cue words (power words) associated with peak performance. Determine which feelings and thoughts contribute most to your performance. Your —power terms and images should have profound personal meanings, and can include body sensations (strong, smooth, balanced, etc.). They can also include images of confidence – such as feeling prepared, believing in your abilities and feeling like a winner. Later, you will intersperse these statements throughout the script.

The next step is to write the imagery script. Start with a brief period of relaxation of five minutes at the most Next, write three positive affirmations to include in the script. Pick three statements that summarize what you want to feel or think about during the next performance. One hockey player came up with these:

1. I am a relaxed and confident player.
2. I am in control of my thoughts during the game.
3. I will focus on one play at a time, one shift at a time—only the current shift matters.

Now, write the mastery imagery portion of the script. This should include the following points:

1. Begin with a description of the competitive environment
2. Write what happens in your pregame routine in real time as it happens
3. Include a short segment of the opening minutes of the game or performance, such as the first two holes in golf or the first shift in hockey.
4. Involve positive emotions and feelings
5. Include cues words or power words
6. Include positive self-talk or confidence builders
7. Use words that mimic the mental images you use when competing

The final step is to record your script. You can use either a simple audio recorder or record your voice into a computer using a microphone and audio software such as Audacity. Using a computer and software is ideal because you can edit the voiceover and add your favorite inspirational music to the background. I often use this method for my mental coaching students, and they love the final audio program!

I make custom audios if you’d prefer not to make your own.

Pregame Mental Preparation Tip #3
Use your favorite music in the background of your mental imagery tape, as this will help inspire and motivate you to greatness. Many pro athletes use music to set the proper mindset prior to competition.

Summary: Making an Imagery Audio Program

1. Recall and record your feelings and thoughts when performing your best in order to develop a list of power terms, feelings or statements that evoke confidence, control and focus that you can integrate into the imagery script.
2. Write out a short mini-relaxation script for the opening of the final tape (see Appendix A for a sample relaxation and imagery script).
3. Write three positive affirmations to include in the script at the end of the relaxation as a transition between the relaxation and imagery portions of the program.

4. Write 10-20 minutes of mastery imagery based on a past peak performance to be recorded in real time on the tape. You might frame this by identifying an important upcoming event.

5. Review and finalize the draft of the imagery script to prepare for recording.

6. Record the script in your own voice onto a simple tape recorder or into a computer to edit and later burn onto a CD or download into an MP3 player or IPOD.

You can listen to the audio program at any time prior to competition as long as it doesn't disturb your coach or teammates. Please don’t use this program while driving yourself to a competition. The best time to listen is in a quiet setting, such your home or hotel room, the night before or the morning of competition or on your team bus.

**Mental Prep & the Pregame Routine**

Consistent mental preparation leads to consistent performance, the hallmark of champion athletes, and the pregame warm up is an excellent time to integrate your mental strategies. Think of this routine as your final mental tune-up prior to competition.

It has four important purposes:

- To get loose and physically warm up
- To focus the mind
- To instill confidence
- To help you trust your ability

The pregame routine is also an excellent time to transition from life into sport – to put on your "game face." Some sports psychology experts would say that sport is an escape from the daily hassles of life. The structure of sports allows you to become fully immersed in the experience and lose your self-consciousness. That's all very Zen ... but what should you include in your pregame routine?

**Employ Sound Pregame Strategies, Not Superstitious Rituals**

Superstitious rituals like eating a ham sandwich before every game, wearing the same shirt under your jersey, talking to your bat, are not the same as pregame routines.

Athlete superstitions are based on the notion that if a certain behavior once brought you good luck, repeating that behavior will bring you more luck. Superstitious rituals have been around since the dawn of sports, and as irrational as they may seem, they sometimes promote a sense of confidence or control. But do they really generate confidence, or are they just wacky habits?

Let’s start by discussing the difference between superstitious rituals and pregame routines or rituals.

Pregame routines help athletes prepare mentally and physically for competition, in a rational, systematic and meaningful way. On the other hand, a superstition is, by definition, irrational: “I ate cold pizza with a plastic fork right before scoring three touchdowns yesterday. Therefore, if I eat cold pizza with a plastic fork today, I’ll score at least three more touchdowns.”

Many athletes have superstitious rituals, but don’t know why they continue to use them.

Adewale Ogunleye, of the Chicago Bears, takes two showers prior to games only because he played well one day after taking two showers:
“I’m not overly superstitious, I don’t know why, I just have to take two pregame showers; one at the hotel, or if we’re home, then at the house. And then, I take one when I get to the stadium. I did it once (by accident) and had a great game. So now I do it all the time.”

I call this an over generalization. The idea that taking two showers before games leads to better performance is irrational.

Tiger Woods probably wears a red shirt for Sunday’s round because he experienced good luck when wearing red on previous Sundays.

Michael Jordan (who graduated from North Carolina) always wore UNC shorts under his Bulls uniform for good luck.

A hockey player who always laces the left skate before the right does so to control pregame jitters.

Athletes use superstitions because they think it brings them luck or controls the future. If a lucky shirt works, some athletes will wear it until the first loss (when it loses its — magic). It’s hard to argue with success. But does an athlete win because they’re wearing some specific clothing or because they’re a mentally strong competitor?

Unlike pregame routines, superstitions are not based on science or reason. But they aren’t necessarily bad. If superstitions build confidence and boost team morale, why not use them?

I have a motto, “If it works, use it.” I would argue that anything that enhances faith in your performance is a bonus. But I’d also offer a warning: Never believe that superstition is the only reason for your success.

Sound mental preparation strategies create the proper mindset for success and are based on reason and science. Don’t rely on lucky superstitions to bring you success.

**Pregame Strategy
#1: Make the Transition from Life to Sports**

The warm up or pregame routine is a time to begin focusing on your sport. Think of your routine as a transition from the office, school, or normal activities to competing in sports. Some athletes contemplate about life issues when they play sports, and this affects their focus and performance. Use the pregame routine to let go of daily hassles, deadlines and chores – to become fully engaged in your sport.

If you saw the movie “Gladiator,” you may recall that Russell Crowe grabbed a handful of dirt and washed his hands with it before doing battle. It was a symbolic gesture that the time had come to transition from the person to the gladiator. This was a survival mechanism for him.

I want you to do the same when you start the warm up for competition. The moment you lace up your skates, put on your shoulder pads, or don your golf cap, you are symbolically making the transition into warrior athlete.

Your mental game strategy is to park any troubles that are occupying your mind for the duration of your competition (this strategy can be applied to practice as well). Make a written list (or mental note) of the life issues on your mind, and make a commitment not to think about them while you’re engaged in sports.
You can't possibly change your life while you're on the field for three hours, so the best option is to temporarily shelve those problems. You can go back to solving unresolved issues after the competition.

During competition, your mind may wander to these issues. If this happens, use the Three R’s to return the focus to your sport. You’re not a robot, and most people have more important things to worry about than sports. Still, do your best to refocus on performance when you find your mind wandering to life's troubles.

**Tactics:**
- Acknowledge any life issues or daily hassles that occupy your mind prior to the start of your pregame routine.
- Write these down or make a mental note, and park them during the game.
- Commit to entering the role of the athlete. Focus only on your sport while you warm up and compete.

#2: Review and Commit to a Game Plan or Strategy
As I stated earlier, it’s important to set a game plan before entering competition, because athletes don't always make the best decisions under pressure. Ideally, you should decide on a game plan prior to your pregame warm up. (In team sports, your coach will have a strategy prepared before the game.)

**Tactics:**
- Do the research needed to scout your opponent(s), if necessary.
- Study the course or track, and decide on the best plan of action, given the conditions.
- Decide which of your strengths will help you win the match, and how to exploit the weaknesses of your opponent(s).
- Identify a strategy that will help you be successful in the game.
- Set one or two process goals that will help you focus on execution and stick to the game plan.

#3: Be Proactive with Your Self-Confidence
Confidence is a long-term project, and develops from years of practice and play. Most athletes should have a good foundation of confidence – one based on past successes and practice. However, some athletes doubt themselves at the worst possible time – during the pregame warm up. Others wait for something good to happen before they feel confident.

Using positive self-talk, review the reasons why you deserve to be confident. Dispute and reframe any pregame doubts that pop into your head.

**Tactics:**
- Review and rehearse a successful recent performance, focusing on feelings of confidence and control.
- Review your list of reasons to succeed and be confident in your performance. Choose to focus on what you have done well recently.
- Use positive self-talk statements to keep the feelings and confident thoughts in the forefront of your mind.
- Identify and dispute any last minute doubts you have prior to competition.

#4: Set Process Goals to Focus on Execution
A priority for your mental game is to prepare to focus on the process – and on the here and now – instead of outcomes or results. Focusing on results only serves to place expectations on your performance.
In your warm up routine, spend a few minutes to set simple objectives for the game, round or match. Make sure these objectives focus your attention on what you want to accomplish and on execution. In addition, keep your mind focused on the warm up and preparing yourself for competition.

This is not the time to dwell on outcomes, compare your game to the opposition, or wonder who will be watching the game. Bring focus and intensity to your pregame routine, so you'll be dialed in when the whistle blows.

Tactics:
- Decide which aspects of your performance you want to improve or focus on that day.
- Set one or two mental and performance process goals that will help you focus on execution.
- If you recognize that you are getting ahead of yourself or thinking about results, refocus on your warm up and getting ready to compete.

#5: Rehearse Your Performance
Your warm up routine is a good time to rehearse your performance and gain confidence in your game. The nature of the rehearsal will depend on your particular sport and learning preference (visual, kinesthetic, auditory).

- A golfer can review his game plan for playing the golf course, including targets and clubs to use from the tee and into greens.
- A baseball player can rehearse the pitches he will see and how he will get a hit.
- A tennis player can mentally review the shots an opponent will hit based on the opponent's tendencies, and then determine how he will successfully return those shots.
- A football player can rehearse his role on each of the plays the team will run in the upcoming game, and experience successful execution of those plays.
- A gymnast can rehearse her beam routine, and feel or see successful execution.
- A dancer can rehearse the elements of the routine, and feel the rhythm or tempo.

Tactics:
- Use mental rehearsal to see and feel a successful game plan or strategy.
- Rehearse your upcoming performance in real time, using a first-person perspective.
- Experience yourself playing with confidence, composure and trust.

#6: Trust in the Practice You Have Done
The pregame warm up or routine is not the appropriate time to continue working on technique or mechanics! You've already put in the practice, and now it's time to just perform! If you haven't reached your — A game by this late hour, it won't magically happen during the warm up. Leave practice behind on the practice field.

The purpose of practice is to improve your game for the future. The warm up is about preparing to perform your best. You must adopt the mindset that your mechanics or technique is good enough to get the job done and win ugly if necessary. Prepare to get the job done with the game you have that day!

Tactics:
- Remind yourself that the warm up is not a time to practice.
- Warm up your body and get a feel for your performance, without making any assumptions about the quality of your technique or results.
- Remind yourself that focus will kick in when the competition begins, and you will get it done.
#7: Make the Butterflies Work for You

Just before you compete, do you have butterflies in your stomach? Is your heart pounding? Are your palms sweaty and your mind racing? More important, do you experience pregame butterflies as signs of anxiety OR signals that you are psyched to compete? Do you say to yourself, “I feel really tense”, or, “I feel really pumped to get into the game?”

Many athletes wrongly infer that pregame jitters mean they must be anxious or afraid to compete. This negative interpretation can cause some people to lose confidence, doubt their performance, and become even more nervous or tense.

Athletes experience two different types of jitters prior to competition. The first is the friendly butterflies, characterized by excitement and anticipation. This is something even world-class athletes experience before the competition starts. They’re excited to play, and ready to get the game going.

The second kind of butterflies produces a sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach. Your mind races, muscles tighten, blood pressure increases, and you may want to throw up. You worry about performing poorly or embarrassing yourself. This genuine anxiety may stem from fear of failure (or other issues), and makes it difficult for you to perform with confidence and ease.

The lesson here is to turn negative anxiety and doubt into positive pregame jitters. Pressure is a natural part of sports, and you need to feel it to play your best! How you perceive pressure determines how well you will handle it.

Players with a fear of failure are often terrified of competition, whereas the great athletes embrace the feelings that come with pressure. Pregame jitters are only bad if you see them as harmful, but they can actually help you perform better if you use this energy to your advantage, if you get the butterflies to fly in formation!

Veteran athletes worry about not having enough intensity and focus to play their best. They often welcome the pregame jitters to help them perform their best! Some athletes worry when they’re not —keyed up enough, and don’t feel the pregame excitement.

One of your pregame objectives is to welcome that shot of adrenaline in order to get you focused and help you perform well. Welcome the excitement of competition as a natural part of sports. This is one of the reasons athletes enjoy competition.

When the jitters come, don’t dwell on the knot in your stomach or the rapid heartbeat. Accept that your body is preparing you to perform your best! These feelings should subside within a few minutes into competition.

Tactics:
- Embrace any pregame jitters as your body's way of preparing for action.
- Remind yourself that pregame butterflies are one reason you love competition.

Summary of mental preparation skills
- Establish game plans or strategies, and commit to those strategies.
- Use mental rehearsal to visualize or feel a performance, routine or strategy.
- Use confidence-enhancing strategies, such as countering last-minute doubts and reviewing the reasons to succeed or to be confident.
- Employ the anticipation and cope model for mental preparation.
- Use pre-performance routines that are integrated into a regular warm up routine.
- Once it’s game time, trust the practice you have put in.
- Interpret pre-competition butterflies as healthy and friendly.
**Wrap-Up**

Keep in mind that the purpose of a warm up or pregame routine is to get ready to play – mentally and physically. You don’t have to win warm ups or perform your best in the pregame! Some athletes worry when a warm up performance is not up to standards, especially when the athlete has perfectionist tendencies. This can lead to doubt, and cause athletes to undermine their own confidence.

I urge you not to evaluate the quality of your warm up. Stay confident in your ability, even if the warm up unfocused and lacking intensity.

Likewise, if you have a superior warm up, be careful not to demand superior results once the competition begins. Yes, you want to feel ready and confident after a solid warm up, but too many athletes sabotage themselves by bringing strict expectations into competition after a flawless warm up. Please refer to Table 2 on the following page.

Use the pregame mental attitude checklist as a summary for your pregame mental preparation. Print Table 2 and share this with your coach or review the checklist before you start pregame activities.

**Mental Prep Area Pregame Attitude Checklist**

*Role of Athlete -*
- ☐ I’m acknowledge distractions from my life
- ☐ I commit to – parking life issues or hassles
- ☐ I fully enter into & commit to role of athlete

*Game Plan or Strategy*
- ☐ I study the course, track conditions, or opponent
- ☐ I will use my strengths to win the game
- ☐ I have set a strategy to be successful in the game

*Proactive with Confidence*
- ☐ I reviewed my list of reasons to be confident
- ☐ I use positive self-talk statements to be confident
- ☐ I shoot down any last minute pregame doubts

*Set Process Goals*
- ☐ I know what cues to focus on during performance
- ☐ I set one or two process goals to focus on execution
- ☐ I commit to not getting ahead of myself

*Rehearse Performance*
- ☐ I see and/or feel a successful game plan or strategy
- ☐ I see and/or feel myself playing with confidence
- ☐ I rehearse the first shot or play of the game

*Prepare to Trust*
- ☐ I do not practice technique during the warm up
- ☐ I do not judge the quality of my warm up
- ☐ I commit to trusting what I have practiced

*Embrace the Butterflies*
- ☐ I feel pumped and ready for competition, not scared
- ☐ I welcome butterflies as this is a sign that I am ready
- ☐ I channel extra energy to help me focus at the start

*Use a Warm-up Routine to Focus the Mind*
All good players use a warm-up routine one hour before they play. Besides helping you get loose and limber, a warm-up routine has several psychological advantages.

The first is that it helps you get your mind focused to play. A warm-up routine helps click in your concentration and put on your game face. It is similar to a runner who stretches before a run or a pilot who performs a checklist to make sure everything is in good order before take-off.

Second, this is an excellent time to put the concerns of your life behind you and prepare for a round of golf. You need a transition between your everyday life and golf. Many people play golf to distract them from pressures at work or school or in everyday life. Use the warm-up to put these pressures behind you. Once you tie on your athletic shoes and enter the field, it is time to think about the game.

In golf, most Touring pros start their warm-up on the practice tee after stretching. They start with a short iron and progress to the driver. Most players finish with a few short pitches. Then they go to the green to warm-up the putter and get a feel for the speed of the green. They finish by hitting some chip shots or bunker shots. You do not need to warm-up for an hour, but you should not rush to the course, get out of the car, and run to the first tee.

Practice prior to a round is just a warm-up and not a "practice session." The major goal of warm-ups is to loosen-up your muscles and focus the mind. You do no want to fall into trying to fix your swing during this time - it is too late. During the warm-up, it's too late to make a mechanical change in your swing. Trying to fix your swing before a round can actually hurt your game. You won't correct the problem in 20 minutes and you certainly won't be able to ingrain the change in your memory.

The best you can do now is to find a swing key that helps you produce a consistent pattern with your shots for that day. If you have a good idea of the pattern of your shots, you can play that shot for the day and later work on making a swing change. Find a shot pattern that you can trust for the day. For example, if you fade the ball from left to right on the range, play that shot when you go to the course.

Do not be hard on yourself if you do not hit it great during your pre-round warm-up. Some golfers just do not hit the ball as well on the range as they do on the course. Have confidence that your swing will improve when you step on the course. Finally, hit a few shots and putt with the normal pre-shot routine you use on the course. This will help you get the right mindset needed for the course, and that is the purpose of the psychological side of your warm-up.
Improving Practice Efficiency

Practice Vs Performance Mindsets

Most athletes understand that the goal of practice and training is to perform better in competition. However, many athletes come to me because they have difficulty taking their "practice game" to competition. They develop confidence from practice and training, but when they step onto the course or playing field, confidence dissipates or dwindles.

When you think about it, it does not seem rational that an athlete can gain a high level of confidence from practice and then not have the same level of "competitive self-confidence," but this is the reality for many athletes who seek me out.

Athletes who have this issue are often struck in the practice mindset. They can't let go of training and forgot the REAL purpose of training and practice.

The best athletes in the world understand that the purpose of training is to develop confidence in their skills so they can perform their best when it counts--in competition. They have a balanced routine between training and competition.

They are dedicated to training and improving their skills AND have the utmost confidence in their ability when they compete. Both the practice mindset and the performance mindset go hand in hand. One without the other will prevent you from achieving your full potential in sports.

I'm sure you have seen athletes on both ends of the spectrum. Maybe a teammate who would train, train, and train harder (and perform well in practice) only to fall short of his or her true ability in competition.

Or maybe you know the athlete who can perform very well in competition without the same devotion to practice that you may have.

The question is how much better can this athlete be if he or she had a better practice mindset?

Many competitive athletes have a strong practice work ethic and motivation, but in competition have a low level of trust and confidence in their abilities.

If you have the practice mindset down pat, but fall short in competition, then it's time to discuss how to best transfer your practice or training to competition so you can play up to your true abilities.

A "gamer" is an athlete that can get the most out of his or her ability and get the job done in crunch time. This should be your goal.

The practice mentality is characterized by high dedication, unwavering motivation, commitment to your goals in sport, self-critical and analytical behavior, a cognitive mindset, make it happen, improve technique, strive for perfection, the need to look good, and focus on future improvement.

On the other hand, the performance mentality is characterized by complete confidence in what you trained, an automatic or reactive mindset, an accepting and non-judgmental mindset, patience, the ability to win ugly or just get the job done without regard to how you get it done, a present time orientation, and the mindset to rely on instincts or what you have practiced.
You now understand that balance in your practice and performance mindsets are necessary to achieve your athletic potential. The next few mental coaching sessions will address how to balance the practice and performance mindsets to get the most out of your practice and training when it counts most – competition.

**How to Apply Mental Strength Skills to Competition**

Many athletes struggle with applying mental strength skills to competition. They understand mental game strategies well, but fail to use what they learn when performing. Mental skills, just like physical skills must be practiced to make them part of you.

Here's a model for applying mental skills:

**Education and Learning --> Practice and Repetition --> Application to Practice.**

After you learn and understand mental strength strategies, you'll want to use them in practice. For example, if you are working on coping with distractions, you'll want to practice refocusing or using the Three R’s in practice. Once you become proficient in practice with refocusing, you'll be able to do it in competition easily.

How can you improve your learning so you can take it to practice?

First, I suggest that you review the mental strength strategies often. For example, you might read your refocus statements each day to make them well-learned and to remind yourself. Repetition is key here, like anything else.

Integrate your mental skills into your pregame and pre-shot routines. The pregame routine is an ideal time to review your mental strategies to help you focus, be confident, and trust in your skills prior to competition. The pregame routine is an excellent time to review your confidence resume to boost confidence or expel high expectations, for example.

If you play a self-paced sports such as tennis, golf, or pool, you can use pre-shot routines to help you apply your mental strength strategies. Pre-shot routines have many of the elements you’d want for a strong mental game, such as this routine for golf:

- **PLANNING** - Select target and the type of shot you want to hit. Be specific and commit to plan.
- **IMAGE** - See or feel the type of shot you selected in the plan. Make it real. Use the 3 C's before you approach the ball: Clarity, Confidence, and Commitment.
- **REHEARSAL** - Use a practice swing to feel the shot you want to hit. Don't just take a mindless swing.
- **FOCUS** - Stay focused on execution and the target/feel of the shot.
- **AIM/ALIGN** - Aim clubface and set body parallel left of clubface.
- **TRUST** - Focus on the target and let the image of the target or the feeling of a good swing trigger the swing.

In addition, you want to assess how you are doing with your mental game after each competition as soft of a personal check up. You can use a journal of use a worksheet to help you assess how you did with certain mental skills you are working to improve.
Here's an example from one of the worksheets or tennis post-match assessments on managing expectations:

Directions: Please answer the following questions based on the mental strategies you learned in about managing expectations by using Process Goals in Tennis Confidence:

1. What are two things you did well today with your mental game and performance?
2. What are two things you would like to improve for the next match?
3. What expectations, if any, did you have going into the today's match that you were aware of?
4. What were your process goals for today's match or tournament?
5. How well did you discard your expectations and replace with your small objectives or process goals?
6. At what time did you start to protect your lead and allow a comfort zone to cause you to tighten up or play protectively?
7. What did you learn about replacing your expectations with manageable process goals that you can apply to future tournaments?

Finally, you want to continue to assess and refine your mental game after each competition. You learn a new skill such as refocusing, apply it to practice, review it often, take it to competition, and then assess how well you did with your application of that skill. You then can make any modifications or tweaks to your well-learned mental skill.

**When is Your Training Over-Training?**

Everyone has different thresholds which are dependent both on genetics as well as learned and conditioned behaviors. When our minds (mental or emotional components) become overloaded, we suffer from a multitude of symptoms that everyone calls "stress".

When our bodies have been overworked, they break down. Our immune system weakens and we are more susceptible to illnesses. We also become more prone to injuries.

So, how do you know when it is time to take a break?

There are both mental/emotional elements as well as physical components to consider.

Answer these questions on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being extremely good and 5 being very poor. Here are a set of questions to consider.

1. How well are you sleeping?
2. How good is your tolerance for problems, issues or confrontations that arise compared to normal? 3. How optimistic are you about things?
3. How well can you focus on things that need to get done in your life?
4. How well are you coping with disappointment, loss?
5. How vigorous and energetic do you feel?
6. How confident or doubtful are you about reaching your goals?
7. How achy or sore do you feel?
8. How tight are your muscles feeling?
9. How well are you recovering from an injury?
You are looking for a change in your physical and mental condition. You need to discern your normal disposition with a change. If you are normally a little sore after a hard workout the day before, it would be natural.

If you feel disappointment about a bad race or not getting a promotion at work, it is understandable. If you are normally intolerable of problems, issues or confrontation -- it is not necessarily an issue of over-doing things. It may be your nature.

Answering these questions with candid insight will lead you to the answer to the issue in question -- do you need to back-off? Some of the items are objective.

The scale is subjective. But, that in and of itself is telling. Subjectivity means from your perspective. At what point do you need to consider time off? If you have a deviation of 2 points or more (i.e. from a score of 2 to a score of 4) in three to four categories you may need some time off.

What happens if you don't listen to your body (and mind)?

Breakdown is inevitable.

That breakdown can be emotionally or physically. When we don't listen to our bodies, it will scream louder for attention. Will power will only take you so far. And then not even will power can sustain you.

For all athletes the question most commonly on their minds is - what are the effects of time off?

*Losses:* Good research exists on the "de-training" effect of athletes. Consider some research evidence: It requires four weeks for a runner's legs to return to normalcy after a marathon. (This is cellular level damage the not subjective "I think I feel good enough to run.") After 15 days of rest there is between 4-8% drop in your ability to maximally process oxygen (VO2max).

Blood volume decreases up to 10% after a three-week lay-off. After 10 days off it will take up to 30 days of training to recover the muscle enzyme levels critical to performance. Heat acclimation may be lost as well.

*Gains:* Time off allows for muscle recovery. Remember, training breaks down tissue and it is the rebuilding of the muscles that make us stronger/faster. It also allows for a mental break from intense and consistent training.

So, how much time off is enough? It is reasonable to expect that a more seasoned runner could take off more time with less effects. If you are going to completely take time off, you might as well do it for a month. Most of your conditioning will be lost within the first two weeks, so why not fully recover with four weeks.

Perhaps a more ideal approach (supported by research) is to do two high intensity workouts per week. Rest the remaining five days in the week.

The evidence is strong that little conditioning will be lost over the four week period and your body and mind should recover perfectly.

A couple ideas for workouts:

Get out on paths and trails. Get well warmed up with 10-15 minutes of easy running.
Then, go 15 minutes at 5k to 10k pace and then warm down. You can also do Fartlek (Swedish for "speed play") workouts.

Get warmed up with 10 minutes of easy running then "play" with different paces over varying terrain. If you like the track, go do high intensity, short distance repeats (12-16x200 walk 200 recovery; or, 8x400 fast jog 400 recovery).

Go from very fast to 5k to 10k to jog alternating in 4-5 minute intervals. Even very high intensity non-running workouts (i.e. cycling intervals) can maintain conditioning.

The bottom line is that you need to pay attention to how you are feeling. For short periods of time you can push through. Over time, pushing through may mean a prolonged forced rest period.
Developing Focused Pre-shot Routines

Years ago, ABC sports would begin its sporting event broadcast with an introductory segment showing winning teams and then would show sporting mishaps as it announced, “and the agony of defeat.” To this day, most people can still picture the skier toppling down the mountainside and feeling the anguish that this athlete must have experienced with a failed run.

Perhaps a more pertinent story centers around the 1989 Masters Golf Tournament in Augusta, Georgia where Scott Hoch missed a two-foot putt in a playoff against Nick Faldo and subsequently lost the tournament.

This is just one of many examples in the history of sports of how the pressure to win can alter a person’s mindset and cause an athlete to “choke” in the final moments of competition.

Hoch had been playing well all week and the tournament win boiled down to the outcome of the last hole of the competition. Needing only to two-putt from 30 feet to win the 1989 Masters, Hoch hit his first putt two feet or so by the hole. This is when his mental game was the most challenged. The thought of winning a major tournament was just enough to wreck havoc on his mind. Hoch later commented, – In my mind I wasn't sure what I was going to do.... That's the worst thing you can do -- step up to a golf shot without a clear idea in your head.”

Hoch said he wasn’t sure about how to play the putt and did not know if he should aim for the inside left of the cup and let the ball break back into the middle of the hole or if he should hit it straight and firm. Golf fans will remember that he stepped up to the ball and then backed away from it, like a pitcher suddenly stopping mid-pitch.

“How am I going to play the putt? Should I hit it on the left edge? Should I hit it straight? It’s only a two foot putt,” thought as Hoch battled with himself. He was confused and unsure about his strategy over one golf shot during most critical time during his preparation, and perhaps in his career.

He stepped up for the second time to hit the putt and hit it at the left edge. The ball went creeping five feet by the hole. The crowd groaned with embarrassment for Hoch, acting as if they had just seen a train wreck before their eyes. Hoch tossed his putter 15 feet into the air and his hopes of winning the most prestigious tournament in golf faded. His feelings of being unsure about how to handle the simple two-foot putt cost him the tournament, and Nick Faldo won.

Almost every athlete—even young athletes—can think back to times when you felt you could not make a decision, had doubt, or questioned your ability just at the wrong moment. Maybe it was that critical second before you started your windup for a pitch, began your tennis serve, or drew back your putter as you tried to make a shot. During that split second before you acted, your mind became distracted and you lost a clear focus or suddenly developed insecure thoughts.

Your best performance depends upon your mindset, focus, and mood the last few seconds before you start to carry out your athletic task. Any breakdown in focus, such as an internal distraction (e.g., I can’t believe how hot it is), breakdown in confidence (e.g. I don’t think I can make the shot), or lack of decisiveness (e.g. should I take the shot or pass it to my teammate) can make even the best athletes look like amateurs.

Sometimes in the heat of competition, an athlete’s decision-making skills and focus can breakdown for many reasons. One breakdown can happen when an athlete will speed up his behaviors or preparation because of the adrenaline of competition. When your behavior is suddenly put into high gear, it will cause you to skip important aspects of the preparatory routine.
Another breakdown can happen when an athlete's focus gets too narrow and he or she leaves out important cues or information necessary to perform at the best level possible.

Even small mental errors or omissions can impair your performance. This recently happened to an athlete at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece, Shooter, Matt Emmons, lost the gold medal because he failed to complete his regular pre-shot routine before executing his final shot. With a commanding lead going into the final shot, Emmons tried not to let his mind wander in the heat of competition.

Emmons said that he was so focused on staying calm during his last shot that he forgot to check the number on the target he was supposed to shoot. He cross-fired (shot at the wrong target,) resulting in a simple mistake that very rarely happens at this level of competition. Observers can only speculate why he got sidetracked from his normal shooting routine.

Perhaps he was too focused on results and got ahead of himself? Maybe he got excited and was in a hurry to finish the last shot? Possibly, in the pressure of the moment, he just forgot a simple step in his routine? Only he really knows what ultimately impacted his performance.

After the event was over, Emmons commented that as part of his normal routine, he always sights the target number in his gun's viewfinder as a starting point and then lowers the gun's sights to focus in on the target. This sounds like something that he can do in his sleep, but forgot to do this step at one of the most critical times of his shooting career.

Emmons needed only a score of 7.2 on his final shot to win a second gold medal. His lowest score on his previous attempts was a 9.3. He simply needed to hit the target to win gold, but instead lost focus on his routine and fired on the wrong target.

“On that shot, I was worrying about calming myself down and just breaking a good shot, so I didn't even look at the [target] number,” Emmons later stated. “I probably should have [looked at the target number]. And, I will from now on!” he continued.

Emmon's mental error dropped him from a commanding lead to an eighth place finish. It is amazing to think that omitting one simple step in a pre-shot routine can cost even a seasoned athlete a gold medal at the Olympics!

What can you learn through the misfortune of this Olympian?

The lesson here is that athletes must have an awareness of when their focus begins to break down. By becoming familiar with the warning signs or triggers that alter focus, athletes can quickly make adjustments to get back on track. The first step in this process is to develop and prepare a pre-performance routine that over time becomes a habit. Habits are hard to break and a prepared routine will help you re-focus and direct your attention to the task at hand.

Without realizing it, each of us has a wake-up routine each morning. For example, the alarm clock goes off. You hop out of bed and head down the hallway to eat breakfast. Then, it's off to brush your teeth before jumping in the shower.

Once out of the shower, it's back to the bedroom to get dressed, and make the bed before leaving for work or school. We don't even think about it, it's just part of a routine. If, for example, you oversleep, what happens? You may find yourself slipping out of routine to rush the process.
In addition, that’s usually when you get to our morning destination realizing you forgot to eat breakfast or are wearing mismatched socks! If our day can be mixed up simply because of missing an alarm, you can imagine how easy it is for an athlete to lose focus and perform poorly.

**Lessons from A Ph.D. Doctoral Dissertation**

In 1990, a friend of mine, Dr. Cohn was preparing for a doctoral dissertation at the University of Virginia, He studied pre-shot routines in golf to become the leading authority in this area. He was extremely interested in how athletic performance would be impacted if athletes could consistently follow a specific routine. This was an area that lacked much research, so he was even more compelled to find out the answer.

Dr. Cohn started by asking golfers to define the routine, (mental and physical,) they used prior to hitting a golf shot. Then, he asked them to use this same routine consistently for each shot and putt.

During their performance, he recorded via videotape the physical portion of their pre-shot routines, and then logged their mental routine by asking them about how well they mentally completed each routine after the round.

As with any research study, there was room for error. He asked the golfers in his research to adhere to a consistent routine—their own. Some routines were better than others. However, his research was simply to have the golfers follow a specific routine consistently, even if it wasn’t a perfect one.

Most of the feedback he received from the golfers indicated that focusing on a specific routine helped to keep negative thoughts from creeping into the execution process, especially during critical times such as shot preparation. He also received some interesting feedback which indicated that in some golfers, working with a consistent routine placed pressure on performing the routine well and others stated that the routine created its own focus distraction.

In the end, his preliminary research demonstrated that having a routine, even an imperfect one, can help keep athletes focused and perform more effectively.

Having a performance routine can help you make crucial decisions; plan and visualize how you will perform; program yourself with instructions; and physically prepare your body to execute successfully, especially during the few seconds prior to starting an athletic task.

Whether you program yourself with confidence and positive feelings or with indecisions and doubt, is up to you! However, if you’re serious about performing your best-- each and every time-- a pre-performance routine will help you create a winning mindset!

**What is a Pre-performance Routine?**

A pre-performance routine can be called by many names. Pre-shot, at-bat, pre-serve, and pre-race routines are just a few examples of pre-performance routines. Throughout this book, I have used the term pre-performance routines to describe any routine, which uses both mental and physical strategies prior to the execution of a sports specific task or skill set.

A golf shot, basketball free throw, field goal, pitch, race motto, dive or any other sports task are all examples of sports specific tasks.

These preparatory behaviors, or pre-performance routines, are excellent tools to help you focus on one shot; one pitch; or one sports specific act at a time and are extremely useful tools to refocus attention when distracted.
The pre-performance routine is a merging of mental and physical preparatory behaviors that blend into one long behavior, (such as planning and focusing skills) at the same time you physically set up for a motor skill, which helps athletes analyze, plan, prepare, and confidently execute motor skills.

The pre-performance routine combines physical actions (such as a practice swing) and specific thoughts or images (visualizing the shot, focusing on the target, and mental cues to trigger the start of your performance such as the image of the target in your mind).

The specific thoughts or behaviors of a pre-performance routine will vary depending on the task (basketball free throw vs. golf putt) and will change from person to person depending on each person's unique quirks and personal preferences.

As a mental coach, my main responsibility is to help athletes develop strong mental routines, rather than working on the physical actions athletes take to prepare for a shot, run, or race. Both the mental and physical aspect of the routine work in unison to produce peak performance, but the important point is that the mental routine is the hardest part for athletes to adhere to and maintain. In addition, sports coaches and instructors do not teach the mental skills in the routine.

What is the purpose of the mental strength routine?

The Five Major Purposes of a Mental Strength Routine

- To focus and divert one’s attention to the task relevant cues, such as focusing on execution instead of the results of your actions
- To shelter the mind from drifting to negative thoughts or ideas that can breed anxiety
- To consistently prepare for each shot, action, etc.
- To instill confidence in one’s ability to execute the shot, action, etc.
- To trust one’s training and execute from memory.

You should strive to prepare consistently for each shot, pitch, run, or throw without becoming obsessive about performing your routine perfectly. Athletes who worry too much about completing a perfect routine are too focused on the routine itself, rather than on making the play. The goal is not perfection, rather, it is to help the athlete think consistently and focus on execution instead of distractions (e.g. a cheering audience) or results (e.g. striking out the person at bat.)

Since each athlete has his or her own unique performance and mental style, there is not a –one size fits all- pre-performance routine. You should develop your own personalized routine depending on your personality, personal preferences, and learning style.

For example, the pace of a routine depends on how complex or simple the structure of the routine will need to be to complete the task. The more ingredients in your routine, the more complex it will be, and the longer it will take to learn and execute. The simpler a routine, the faster it is, and the easier it is to follow.

The specific behaviors and thoughts that make up your pre-performance routine also depend upon your learning style. For example, if you primarily learn by pictures and respond better to visual images, you should use those images to help you perform. If you are predominately a visual learner, your mental rehearsal should comprise visual images as opposed to kinesthetic (body movement) images.
How you structure your pre-performance routine should be influenced by:

1. The type of sport task you perform (baseball pitch vs. golf putt)
2. Your personality and preferred pacing
3. Your personal learning style (visual vs. kinesthetic)
4. Whether the task you are performing is self-paced or paced by others (pitching vs. batting OR service vs. return of serve)

**What Sports Skills Will Benefit from a Pre-shot or Pre-performance Routine?**
The terms pre-shot routine and pre-performance routine are used interchangeably. Both terms apply to various sports skills, which require just a few seconds to execute.

Some examples are shooting, putting, pitching and swinging. The mental and physical routine you perform to prepare for a task is also called a preparatory routine. For example, football players use a preparatory routine called a pre-play routine prior to snapping the ball to the quarterback.

Pre-shot preparation involves using your mind effectively to prepare positively for any self-paced sports skills such as an at-bat routine, golf putt, tennis serve, or bowling shot. However, pre-performance routines also apply to continuous sports such as hockey or swimming.

Any skill that is paced by the performer can have a defined pre-shot routine such as shooting. Even reactive sports can use pre-shot routines, such as a field goal in football or a free throw in basketball.

Below are a few examples of the sports skills that utilize pre-shot routines:

- A Golf shot
- An at-bat in baseball
- A Pitch in baseball
- Free-throw
- A field goal kick in football
- A throw in bowling
- A play in football
- Most shooting sports
- A Puck drop in hockey
- A Soccer corner kick
- A Tennis serve
- A Return of serve in tennis
- A Volleyball serve
- A Return of serve in volleyball
- Shooting
- A motocross race
- An auto race
- An event routine in gymnastics
- Any self-paced motor skill

The ultimate goal of the pre-shot routine is to ensure that consistent preparation leads to consistent performance. If you watch professional athletes perform their routines, you can see a pattern.
For example, Kobe Bryant uses a specific free throw routine prior to each foul shot.

Phil Mickelson plans and prepares a golf shot by first conferring with his caddy about club and target selection after they calculate the yardage to the target. He will then visualize his shot and take a practice swing to feel the shot he wants to hit. He focuses on the shot and target as he approaches the ball, sets up and aligns to the target the same way each time, wiggles to get comfortable over the ball as he looks a couple times at the target, and then thinks about one swing thought or trigger such as tempo to help initiate the swing.

What’s most important is having a good mental approach or an effective mental routine?

Most athletes who want to enhance performance have a physical routine and can easily perform the physical aspects of the routine in their sleep. However, based upon experience, research and working with athletes, most athletes have difficulty performing the mental aspects of their routine with intensity and focus.

A mental strength pre-shot routine works to help you to:

1. Observe and process information.
2. Make decisions, set strategies, and develop a plan.
3. Program your mind and body to perform well.
4. Mentally rehearse the skill you are about to execute.
5. Get your mind in optimal state to execute your best.

If you neglect one of these areas in your preparation, you fail to prepare fully for execution. The objective is to train yourself to approach each shot or performance with conviction, confidence, and trust in your ability to perform well.

Most professional athletes use well-defined, specific routines to help them prepare for execution. They are very systematic and precise in the way they plan and prepare for execution of a sports task. Every athlete uses his or her own style to prepare, but they all try to achieve the same goal – to perform with confidence and trust.

For example, pitcher Nolan Ryan before each pitch started his routine off the mound by checking the game situation and thinking about what pitches he wants to throw depending on what pitches are working, the batter’s performance record, and the current count (such as strikes).

On the rubber, he will received the sign from the catcher and accept or reject the call depending on what he wants to throw. He then committed to a pitch he wanted to throw and pre-play the pitch in his mind by seeing and or feeling the pitch in his mind. He might take a breath to center himself and then use one mental cue or trigger such as “smooth” or “free” as he prepared his windup and focused on the target or the trajectory of the pitch.

The common attribute with exceptional athletes is that each person has a routine he or she believes in and they follow that routine whether they are winning or in last place. The pace, intention, and specific behaviors in your routine will depend on your personality and what feels most comfortable to you.

**Pre-shot Routines are not Superstitions**

Pre-shot or pre-performance routines are not the same as superstitions (such as wearing a lucky shirt or making a specific body gesture) that athletes employ for good luck prior to competition.

What is the difference between a pre-shot routine and a superstition?
Routines help athletes to prepare, in a meaningful way, for the execution of a motor task such as a basketball free throw. A basketball player will bounce the ball to gain a feeling for the weight of the ball and develop a rhythm. He will also visualize a good shot, which we know helps to program his body for execution. He will take a deep breath to relax and this helps him focus on the basket or other target as he releases the ball. These mental tasks help to lock the mind into execution and are done purposefully.

A superstition is a single behavior an athlete adopts that is based more on luck and false generalizations than on reason. Superstitions, such as when Tiger Woods wears a red shirt for Sunday’s round, are no doubt tied to his “luck” and past success on Sundays when wearing red. A hockey player might always lace up the left skate before the right prior to a game. Athletes use superstitions to build confidence. If a lucky shirt works, some athletes will keep it in play until the first loss when it loses its “magic.”

Superstitions, unlike routines, are not based on fact or reason. If an athlete attributes his success to some consistent superstitious ritual, such as wearing a red shirt on Sunday or eating a certain food prior to each game, the athlete will think it “works” and keep repeating the behavior, until he thinks otherwise.

The athlete believes the ritual brings success and that has an effect on his confidence level. Former baseball player Wade Boggs was called the “Chicken Man,” because he had to eat chicken before every game. Ted Williams spent many hours each year picking out the perfect piece of wood that he thought would make the best bat. These are all superstitions and not routines.

Superstitions are not necessarily bad. In fact, they can build confidence and help boost morale to enhance your mindset. However, to truly enhance performance, you should use proven mental preparation strategies prior to your performance.

**Five Mental Strength Stages in a Preparatory Routine**

If you are reading this book, you likely are a serious athlete who has a well-defined physical routine—one you perform consistently. For example, if you play tennis, you set up to the service line, bounce the ball a couple times, and prepare for the ball toss and wind up. Most tennis players employ these simple physical actions, but what mental thoughts and images do you have in your routine?

If you aren’t able to quickly answer this question, then developing a preparatory routine to fine-tune your mental game may help enhance your physical performance.

When an athlete tells me that it feels like they’re just “going through the motions physically” during their service routine, this indicates that no mental focus is present and we need to work on the mental aspects of the routine. It is easy to perform the physical preparation consistently, but much harder to apply the mental stages of the routine.

Most athletes will spend hours endless working to refine their physical routine to near perfection; however, they spend little if no time defining a mental routine. In my work with athletes, I teach them to integrate a mental strength routine into their existing physical routine to maximize performance potential.

Table 1 displays a summary of the mental strategies I teach athletes to apply when developing their own personalized pre-shot routines. The mental strategies must be customized for each athlete depending the athlete’s sport, personal preference, and dominant learning style.

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**Table 1. Steps in the Mental Routine**

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**STAGE** | **STRATEGY OR BEHAVIOR**
--- | ---
Plan | To develop a plan of action based on your assessment of the conditions.
Imagine | To program your body with an image, usually a visual or feeling type image, such as the target orientation. Confidence and trust begin here.
Rehearse | To rehearse the plan mentally and/or physically prior to execution and gain confidence in your plan.
Focus | To stay task-focused or grounded in the present moment and not attaching any labels to your execution.
Trust | To trust your body to perform what you have practiced without getting in the way of your motor programming.

The stages are broken into two main phases: the planning and programming phase and procedural phase. The first steps of the routine consist of the planning and programming phase. The planning and programming phase includes the stages of planning, imagining and rehearsing.

During the planning and programming phrase, you assess the surroundings and take in information in order to plan, program, and mentally prepare for execution. You make most decisions during this part of the routine to plan for the upcoming performance or shot.

For example, the tasks a baseball player performs on-deck prior to the at-bat can be considered planning and programming. The baseball player is timing the pitcher on-deck (rehearsing); visualizing pitches he may need to respond to and thinking about a how to react (imagining); and developing an at-bat strategy prior to stepping into the batter’s box (planning).

Most decisions are set prior to getting into the position where you will execute the sports task. Then it is a matter of carrying out the performance plan— the procedural phase of execution. The procedural phase of the routine includes the stages of focus and trust.

Earlier in your routine, most of the assessment and planning is done. For example, once the batter steps into the batter’s box, he goes through his set up such as tapping the base once, starting to narrow his vision on the pitcher (focus), and getting physically set in the batter box. These stages of the routine fall under procedure because now the batter is going through his physical routine to get ready for the pitch. When he shifts his focus to the pitcher, he is now signaling to himself that he trusts his physical ability to carry out the plan.

The five stages of the routine are universal mental preparation strategies that apply to several sports skills, especially self-paced skills such as pitching or batting routines in baseball (also called a pitching or at-bat routine) and to the start of swimming 100-meter freestyle. To expand upon the process of the routine, below is a pre-shot routine, which a tennis player may use when serving.

**Stage 1: Plan for the Best**
A tennis player has to first assess the surrounding conditions and develop a plan for each serve depending on several factors. For example, the wind and court conditions will affect the type of serve to select.

The type (topspin) and location (down the line) of the serve will depend on his opponent’s position on the return of service and the opponent’s strengths and weaknesses.
In addition, the server will also recall the success or lack of success of past serves in similar conditions to formulate a plan.

After he has assessed the conditions and other factors, the next step is to plan the serve. Realize that this plan happens in a matter of seconds for the skilled player. If you neglect this step, you will not be able to make a positive, determined serve. The plan will typically include the type of serve and target location in this instance.

The type of serve (topspin down the line) dictates the next stage of the planning and programming part of the service routine.

**During the planning stage, you will:**
- Assess the conditions or situation in the environment.
- Pick a visual target (if necessary) for your sport.
- Formulate a plan based on the current situation and conditions.
- Stay committed and avoid becoming indecisive with your choices.

**Stage 2: Imagine the Plan in Full Detail**

Once the plan is set and you commit to the plan fully, the next step is to ingrain the plan further by imagining the execution of the plan. The rehearsal or imaging stage of the routine, often blends with the planning stage as they are done at the same time. For example, when a golfer is planning a shot, she often will use imagery skills to help develop the plan. This step further ingrains the commitment to the plan.

When the tennis player is planning the serve, he is also pre-playing the options in his mind with mental imagery or imagination. When you are mentally rehearsing the plan for the upcoming execution of a serve, you have several options depending on your dominant learning style.

I often ask athletes if they are visual or kinesthetic performers to help them develop the best plan based upon their performance style. You can identify your performance style by determining if you perform by visual images (seeing the target or the ball fly to the target) or by kinesthetic images (feeling a good tempo or balance with the service motion). Some athletes already know the style they prefer, while some athletes do not.

You can do a simple imagery exercise at home or on the court, field, or course to determine your dominant style of learning and performing. This exercise helps you to identify what images you might use while rehearsing a skill.

Start this exercise by closing your eyes and visualizing yourself on the tennis court (or your athletic arena or space) during practice. Imagine hitting a few serves in your mind (or swinging at the ball as it is pitched to you, or releasing the ball for a free throw) as if you are there right now.

What did you focus on during this exercise? Did you see the racquet, the ball in flight, or the target in your mind? On the other hand, did you focus more on the feelings of your body, such as the coil of your body or tempo of the stroke? This helps you to identify what modality you may naturally use to help you execute a motor skill.

Once you determine your dominant mode of imagery, you should use this style and integrate it into the imaging phase of your routine. Many athletes use both modalities when they use mental rehearsal or imagery—visual and kinesthetic (feel). Therefore, you can combine feelings with visual references such as seeing the tennis serve and target location in your mind.
However, you most likely will have one dominate style of imagery you can tap into to pre-program yourself for the execution of the serve, pitch, shot or any motor skill.

**During the imaging stage, you will:**
- Use your powers of imagery to help you commit to a plan.
- Tap into and apply your dominant learning or imagery style to help you pre-program the upcoming skill.
- Pre-play the plan for the upcoming performance, shot, race, or routine in your mind using your dominant imagery style (visual or kinesthetic).

**Stage 3: Pre-Play Your Performance in Your Head**
The rehearsing step in your pre-shot or pre-performance routine is just an extension of imaging stage. After you have decided on a plan and imagined the plan, you can rehearse it by combining a mental and physical rehearsal.

For some sports, this rehearsal may just be an extension of the imaging phase. For example, the tennis player may plan the serve and then go right to imagine and rehearsal stage of the pre-service routine. A tennis player can feel or see a good serve, but no real physical rehearsal of the serve typically has to occur.

In many sports, such as golf or baseball, athletes use a practice swing to rehearse the shot they are going to hit. The practice swing is more than just a physical rehearsal of the shot – it combines an active recall of the memory of a good shot with the feelings the athlete wants to have during the actual performance such as good balance or smooth tempo.

A gymnast, for example, may go through a mental and physical rehearsal of the routine in warm up or just prior to her routine. This might include a full physical rehearsal of the movement or a partial physical rehearsal by feeling or seeing the more complex components of the routine, or simple a mental rehearsal of the routine.

Athletes in many sports use a physical rehearsal to prepare for the execution of a motor skill. Here are some examples:

- A football place-kicker rehearsing the field goal kick during his routine.
- A basketball player feeling his stroke before a free throw.
- A baseball batter taking a few practice strokes to feel a good swing.
- A gymnast rehearsing her beam routine before the event.
- A golfer using a practice stroke to rehearse the feel of the distance of a putt.
- A swimmer rehearsing the feeling of a turn prior to the start of the swim.
- A motocross racer rehearsing the feeling of the hole shot (first turn) prior to the start.
- A sprinter rehearsing the start of the 100-meter.

**During the rehearsing stage, you will:**
- Use your powers of mental rehearsal to help pre-play your performance.
- Use your dominant learning or imagery style or a combination of learning styles to help you prepare to execute the upcoming task.
- Combine overt physical movements with mental rehearsal to pre-play the feeling you want for an upcoming performance, shot, race, or routine.

**Stage 4: Focus on the Important Cues**
One of the goals of your pre-performance routine is to help you stay on task. Following a specific routine helps you know what to focus on and when. It is easier to focus on the present and harder for the mind to wander when you know exactly what thoughts or feelings you are supposed to have and when you should apply them.

Including focusing as a stage of the pre-shot routine because the purpose of the routine is to help you focus on execution in the “here and now” rather than how the specific task was performed in the past or what the task needs to be for the future (e.g. a certain score).

Defining task-relevant cues is what successful coaches do to help athletes gain an execution focus. Task-relevant cues are the thoughts and images (cues) that are important for an athlete to focus on given the requirements of the skill or task. If you have identified what to focus on, you are not mentally searching when it matters most—you know what to do when the game comes down to crunch time.

The important ideas here are:
1. Every athlete must define what to focus on in his or her pre-shot routine by identifying the cues that are relevant for execution.
2. Athletes should identify what is not relevant to execution. This process will help you to attend to the cues that will keep you grounded in the moment and help to deflect irrelevant thoughts or distractions. The task-appropriate cues will define what is important to think about prior to performance. In addition, identifying important cues should help you be aware when you get out of your routine and lose focus on the task.

Below is an example of task-appropriate cues during a basketball free throw:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TASK-RELEVANT CUES</th>
<th>TASK-IRRELEVANT CUES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Bouncing the ball</td>
<td>● The last free-throw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Feeling the weight of the ball</td>
<td>● Who is behind the basket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Setting up on the line</td>
<td>● Who is in the stands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Seeing the shot trajectory or feeling the shot</td>
<td>● The last miss at the line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Taking a practice stroke</td>
<td>● What’s for dinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Visualizing the ball going in the basket</td>
<td>● Work assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Balance</td>
<td>● Score of the game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Reacting to the target</td>
<td>● Anxiety about missing the shot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Concern about letting teammates down</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you have identified what to focus on, you are not mentally searching when it matters most—you know what to do when the game comes down to crunch time. This is why pre-performance routines are so important. They help you stay grounded to the task by immersing your focus in execution.

**During the focusing stage, you will:**

- Stay grounded in the present moment on execution instead of results or consequences.
- Know what's important to focus on via your task-relevant cues.
- Be able to refocus when you are out of your normal routine.

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**Stage 5: Trust What You Have Practiced**

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Everything you do in the routine prepares you for one decisive moment – execution. To review, the three main purposes of the routine are to help you feel confident, focus on execution, and have faith in your body to perform.

For this reason, the final stage of the pre-shot routine, trust, is very important to consistent execution. One of my philosophies about motor performance is that consistent preparation leads to consistent performance. In other words, the final thought you use leading up to execution is critical to consistent execution.

If you watch pro sports, you can see that athletes consistently apply a physical routine. In most cases, the physical routine flows from the thoughts and images an athlete applies using a mental routine. The final preparatory thought (or image) you use prior to the serve, throw, or performance is what sets the body into motion and programs you for success. I spend a lot of time with students discussing the appropriate thought or image for them to use prior to execution.

What is trust and what thoughts lead to consistent execution?

The technical definition of trust is: “The process of letting go of conscious controlling tendencies and allowing your skills to be initiated from motor memory (or what you practiced).”

The simplistic version of the trusting mindset is the ability to let your body do what you have trained it to do. Often, athletes will not rely on what they have practiced outside of competition. In the trusting mindset, athletes should suspend the conscious mind and let instincts take over.

If you’ve ever watched the movie, “The Karate Kid”, you’ve seen a perfect example of an athlete focusing and then executing the kick by trusting what his body had been trained to do. His trusting mindset allowed him to perform effortlessly without the mental shackles of over-analysis.

I am sure you have heard the term muscle memory, which is really motor memory. Motor memory helps you recall how to perform a motor skill—it’s the memory that forms when you practice a skill. As you practice a skill repeatedly, you develop a motor program in memory of how the skill should feel and how you should perform the skill.

With a lot of practice, you no longer have to think about the “how to” or the technical aspects of the skill; your motor memory takes over in competition and allows you to transfer what you practiced. The trusting mindset relies on motor memory based on what you have trained yourself to do in practice.

Now that you understand the trusting mindset, what thoughts and images will help you get into this type of mindset? Are you a visual learner or are you a kinesthetic (or feel-oriented) learner? The thoughts and images you will use should depend on your learning style and preference.

The best strategy is to keep your approach to motor skills simple. If you have a checklist of six cues you focus on before you throw a pitch, for example, this will only hurt your ability to trust because there are too many things to focus on at once.

This is why you practice, so you can repeat a pitch effortlessly in a game situation without bogging yourself down with the details of how to make a good pitch.

The last thought prior to execution should be simple, non-mechanical, and based on an image the suits your learning style.

**During the trusting stage, you will:**
- Simplify the thoughts and images in the routine.

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• Have faith that your body knows how to perform what you want to do.
• Use your dominant learning style to help you perform your best.

Examples of Pre-shot Routines
Most athletes, already use a pre-shot routine, but might not call it such. You should work within the framework of your existing routines by integrating the important mental components into your current physical routine.

Since what athletes seek to do in sports is to perform well physically, it’s easy to have a strong physical routine already in place. However, a mental routine is far more critical to consistent performance, but many athletes forget about this important component to their performance routine.

If you’re unsure about where to start to build your pre-shot or pre-performance routine, this chapter will help you modify your current routine to incorporate mental strategies for the best results.

Tables 3 thru 6 detail pre-shot routine outlines to use when developing mental strategies for pre-performance routines.

As you review the tables, you will need to customize one of these pre-shot examples based upon your sport and learning style.

Table 3: Pre-shot Routine for Full Shot in Golf

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE</th>
<th>THOUGHTS/BEHAVIOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plan</td>
<td>Select a visual target and the type of shot you want to hit. Be specific and commit to the plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>See or feel the type of shot you selected in the plan. Make it seem as real as possible by feeling the shot or by visualizing the shot trajectory. (e.g., hit the green and roll into the hole. Rehearse Use a practice swing to feel the shot you want to hit. Focus on balance or one simple feeling of the swing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Stay focused on execution and the visual or feel of the shot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set up</td>
<td>Aim the clubface and set your body parallel to the left of the clubface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Focus on the target and let the image of the target or the feeling of a good swing trigger the swing. No more than one swing should be thought about here.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: A Pre-Race Routine for Motocross
### Table 5: Pitching Routine for Baseball

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE</th>
<th>THOUGHTS/BEHAVIOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prepare (off rubber)</td>
<td>Release the last play. Take a slow, deep breath as you step on the mound. When you step on the rubber, you are ready to focus on the next pitch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan (on the mound)</td>
<td>Receive the sign from the catcher and commit to or change the pitch! Do not proceed unless you are committed to pitch selection and location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>See the pitch you want to throw. A positive image here is necessary to feel confident and get into a rhythm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehearse</td>
<td>Rehearse the feeling of the pitch you want to throw. Make it a pre-play of the actual pitch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Focus on the process. Narrow your focus on a specific target or pitch location. Here, you are setting the stage to see it and react,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set up (on rubber)</td>
<td>Take a deep breath and get set for wind up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>See the target or feel the pitch and react freely. Do not “guide” the pitch. trust your motion and action. Focus on one cue word or phrase to help you throw freely such as “stay behind the ball.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 6: Service Routine for Tennis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE</th>
<th>THOUGHTS/BEHAVIOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prepare (off rubber)</td>
<td>Release the last play. Take a slow, deep breath as you step on the rubber.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan (on the mound)</td>
<td>Receive the sign from the catcher and commit to or change the pitch! Do not proceed unless you are committed to pitch selection and location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>See the pitch you want to throw. A positive image here is necessary to feel confident and get into a rhythm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehearse</td>
<td>Rehearse the feeling of the pitch you want to throw. Make it a pre-play of the actual pitch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Focus on the process. Narrow your focus on a specific target or pitch location. Here, you are setting the stage to see it and react,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set up (on rubber)</td>
<td>Take a deep breath and get set for wind up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>See the target or feel the pitch and react freely. Do not “guide” the pitch. trust your motion and action. Focus on one cue word or phrase to help you throw freely such as “stay behind the ball.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using the above examples, you can apply each stage in the mental routine (plan, image, rehearse, focus, and trust) to almost any pre-performance or pre-shot routine. These examples are templates or starting points that you can use and modify for your own sport based on your own preferences and learning style.

Keep in mind that routines need to personalized for each athlete rather than trying to create a “one-size-fits-all” routine. The template is a starting place for you to develop a pre-shot or pre-performance routine for your sport.

**Mental Imagery and the Pre-shot Routine**
Traditionally, mental imagery has been used by athletes to mentally practice motor skills outside of regular practice or games. It can also enhance your ability to perform motor skills in competition by improving focus; helping you makes plans and develops strategies; and programming your body to execute a specific sports task.

Mental imagery and its components (images, thoughts or feelings) are vital to your pre-shot or pre-performance routines because they help you to successfully program your body to perform. When you recall the feeling of a good dive for example, you are using mental imagery to help you perform. Not all athletes, however, correctly apply mental imagery in the routine.

Many high level athletes talk about the term visualization. Pro athletes such as Jack Nicklaus, a long time advocate of “visualization,” have popularized this term. The problem is that mental imagery or mental rehearsal encompasses more than “visualization!” or visual components of imagery. A common misconception about visualization is that you must actually “see” pictures in your mind to use mental imagery.

For the sake of this section I’m going to discuss some non-visual visualization. During my workshops and when I work one-on-one I help athletes that can’t “see” images create outstanding pictures.

So, let’s go with the assumption that not every athlete is a visual learner and performer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE</th>
<th>THOUGHTS/BEHAVIOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prepare (off the line)</td>
<td>Release the last point. Take a slow, deep breath as you step up to the line. Narrow your focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan</td>
<td>Plan the type of serve you want to hit based on your opponent’s weakness and what’s working for you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>See the serve you want to hit. Positive image here is necessary to feel confident and get into a rhythm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehearse</td>
<td>Rehearse the feeling of the serve you want to hit. Make it a pre-play of the actual serve. Take a practice stroke here if possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Focus on the process. Narrow your focus on a specific target or location. You are setting the stage to react.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set up (on the line)</td>
<td>Take a deep breath and get balanced on the line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>See the target or feel the serve and react freely. Do not “guide” the stroke. trust your motion and action. Focus on one cue word or phrase only.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There have been athletes who have tried to fit into a visual performer perspective, but were more kinesthetically (feel) inclined, and that’s fine.

These athletes’ thought that they must “see” pictures in their mind and to be able to visualize their performance. Therefore, they are actually harming their performance and confidence by forcing themselves into a style of mental imagery that is not suited to their style of visualization. As a result, they see a negative change in performance enhancement.

However, when I work with an athlete one-on-one I am able to help them tap into ALL their senses so that their performance can and does improve.

Athletes use a variety of internal representations (visual, feeling, auditory, etc.) to help them develop the proper mindset for optimal performance. To make the most of visualization, you will need to tap into the correct pre-shot images (based on your style of learning and performing) that will help to program your body for consistent execution and peak performance.

One caution here: too many thoughts or images (or trying too hard) can confuse the mind and limit your performance. Likewise, if you improperly program yourself with the wrong images, performance can suffer. The purpose of this section is to help you discover your preferred learning style and to use the correct pre-shot images during your pre-performance or pre-shot routines.

**Three Types of Learning Styles**

Most athletes use one of three main types of learning styles. If you learn better via a visual style, for example, then you will most likely want to perform with visual images as well. Below are the three most popular learning styles that you can integrate into your mental routines.

**Visual Learners**

Visual learners prefer to get information through their visual system. The visual learner absorbs information best by observing a demonstration. Watching another athlete perform a movement is a typical learning scenario for visual learners.

Athletes who are predominately visual learners prefer coaches to use visual aids such as pictures, videotapes, and charts.

In terms of imagery, visual learners like to see pictures in their heads (also called mind’s eye) of how a movement should look or to focus on a target’s position (target orientation). For example, a very common application of this type of imagery is a golfer who pictures the target in his mind’s eye prior to and during the execution of a golf shot.

**Kinesthetic Learners**

Kinesthetic performers learn by experience and want to know how a movement feels. The kinesthetic athlete must program the body with what the correct movement feels like. The proper feeling of a movement triggers skills based on knowledge of past performances.

The kinesthetic athlete prefers coaches to put them in the correct position so they can experience the movement first hand. In terms of imagery, kinesthetic learners like to have an image (or memory) of the feeling of the movement to execute the skill. For example, a bowler might feel the tempo of a smooth stroke before the execution of the throw.

**Auditory Learners**

An auditory learner prefers to focus on sounds and rhythms to learn a sports skill. Auditory athletes learn best with the use of auditory language that includes lectures, discussions, and audio tapes.
Auditory athletes prefer that coaches discuss and talk about movements or skills and game strategies. In terms of mental imagery, auditory athletes perform best when they program their performance via physical sounds and word cues. For example, a tennis player might focus on what a good shot sounds like by rehearsing the sound of the tennis racquet making solid contact with the ball.

**All Athletes are Multi-sensory Learners**

Do not assume that you must fit into one of the three styles of learning and performing. All athletes use a combination of modalities (senses) when they learn, perform, and imagine the execution of motor skills, they just might have one that is preferred or dominate.

For example, a field goal kicker in football might see the flight of the kick in his mind and rehearse the feeling of the kick during his pre-kick routine.

I have noticed everyone has a preferred or dominant style of learning and performing even though they might perform using a combination of two or three styles. The literature on mental imagery states that the most effective type of structured imagery practice involves the use of all senses so it is more life-like. You will want to use the images that will best help pre-program your mind and body to perform consistently based on your dominant learning style.

**In-Practice Exercise for Pre-performance Imagery**

I suggest the use of practice exercises to help determine an athlete’s preferred pre-shot imagery by spending time on the course, court, or field working on a few different images.

The idea here is that you want a positive mental image to occupy the mind and to program the body in a positive way so that you can trust (and remove interference from the conscious mind). The body performs at its peak with the use of simple images (a feeling, an auditory cue, or a visual image) rather than with verbal commands or cognition about how to perform the movement.

For illustration purposes, let’s pretend you are a tennis player for a brief moment. As your mental game coach, we would go to the court and test several possible images to program your body to hit your best serve. First, I would ask you to hit a few serves in a visual mode by trying to visualize the flight of the serve or just focus on the target (location on the court) in your mind’s eye as you wind up and hit the serve. You might hit about 10 serves using this type of imagery.

Second, I would ask you what a good serve feels like. You might say, —Good extension or good balance.— Then, I would have you hit 10 serves each focusing on good tempo, balance and full extension, one at a time.

Finally, I would ask you to use a verbal cue to trigger the serve such as “smooth or good tempo.” I would have you hit 10 serves focusing on a verbal or auditory mechanism to trigger your performance.

The final step is to compare the various service sets you performed to examine:

- The consistency of the serve (location and ball flight)
- How effortless each set was to perform.

Most often, athletes will pick one trigger cue or image that felt easy to do and produced the best performance. This method can be applied to any self-paced task such as a pitch in baseball or the start of any continuous sport such as swimming.

**Using Imagery in Your Routine**
Based on your learning style you can now structure imagery and the appropriate mental images in your regular pre-performance preparation. The goal here is to help you feel confident, focus on the right cues, and build trust at the moment of execution.

As discussed previously, mental imagery can be used at various stages throughout the routine. In fact, an athlete’s routine is often a series of images. Simple images or feelings should be used instead of too much conscious thought. Once you become proficient with performing a skill, it does not take a lot of thought to execute that skill.

For example, most people can play darts with little or no practice. It only takes the sight of the bull’s eye to help trigger the throw. You aim at the target and throw. You do not have to make it more difficult than that. When in doubt, you should lean toward simplicity in your routine. You can — see the plan, mentally rehearse the performance, and program yourself using a simple mental image.

The final thought or image, (also called a swing cue or swing thought if you are a golfer, for example), is the most critical thought in your routine to successfully program your body to perform well. The last thought you use to trigger performance helps to increase trust at the decisive moment you execute.

You need to simplify your pre-performance thoughts to only one visual, auditory, or kinesthetic cue. This cue should not be about a “how to” of your performance or about the details of technique. Using the dart-throwing example, the mind only needs a target and hand-eye coordination takes over.

Table 9 contains few of examples of visual and feel oriented thoughts you can adopt to trigger your performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual-Oriented</th>
<th>Feel-Oriented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>See the target in your mind’s eye as you perform</td>
<td>The feeling of smooth tempo such as the bowler feeling tempo as he makes the throw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing the pattern of your performance such as the flight of a pitch</td>
<td>The feeling of an effortless performance such as the Motocross racer feeling in a flow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining a spatial orientation of your opponent</td>
<td>The overall feeling of a correct performance such as a weight lifter feeling good balance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keep in mind that many athletes use several modes to help program themselves for performance. You will need to test out what works best for you. One formula will not work for all people.

In summary, you can apply mental imagery in the following ways to:

- Help you plan and strategize, such as a soccer player performing a corner kick and imagining the best option for putting the ball in play

- Mentally and or physically rehearse your performance such as a golfer seeing a good golf shot and feeling the correct shot during his practice swing.

- Program your body by using a last thought or image as you begin your performance such as a tennis play seeing the target in her mind’s eye as she hits a serve.

**Routine Breakdowns and Fixes**

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The clear advantage of having a defined pre-performance or pre-shot routine is that you can more easily detect when you get off task or out of your normal routine, (known as a routine breakdown.) When you have defined the cues and images of your routine and are aware of those behaviors, it is easier to detect a problem in your routine. A breakdown can happen when you are indecisive, have doubt, or become distracted during your routine.

**Common Routine Breakdowns**

External distractions are one example of how your focus and thus routine can breakdown. Crowd noise or hecklers can be distracting for some athletes. If you have even been to a college basketball game, you have seen the home team crowd trying to distract the foul shooter at the line by waving banners and making loud noises in an attempt to distract the foul shooter. This external distraction can get an athlete off-task if he gives energy to the external distraction.

When you are in the zone and focusing well, external distractions are not issues. Athletes such as Mike Singletary have talked about how external distractions, such as fans, help to force him into a deeper level of focus and into his cocoon of concentration.

However, when not playing well, athletes seem more bothered by simple external distractions and have “rabbit ears” in which they hear and notice everything especially in the competitive environment.

**Examples of Common External Distractions**

- Unusual noises such as the sound of clubs rattling in a player's bag on the adjacent fairway
- Visual distractions such as fans waving banners behind a basketball net
- Judges, scouts, or parents present. (e.g. A figure skater or gymnast focusing too much on the presence of judges.)
- The presence of media such as photographers, cameras, heat from lights, etc.
- Over-coaching—coaches who do not know when to stop coaching and let athletes play

Distractions in the environment (external distractions) are much easier to ignore compared to so-called internal distractions which come from your own thoughts and beliefs.

Internal distractions or negative thoughts such as doubt or indecision can ruin a focused routine. A doubt or negative thought can derail confidence and sabotage trust. Doubt and confidence are polar opposites. If you are completely confident, you are not having doubt. If you have doubts about your ability to perform, you are not fully confident.

The main purpose of the routine is to help you feel confident when you execute your performance. When you have a doubt during the most important phase of your pre-performance routine, you are undermining your ability to perform. Some doubts are very straightforward while other doubts are more subtle.

A swimmer may say to themselves on the blocks, “I hope I don’t embarrass myself and finish dead last in this heat.” Doubts can be more subtle and disguised in the form of a question such as, “Will I swim as fast as I did in qualifying?” In either case, you will undermine your confidence if you do not recognize the doubt setting in and make an adjustment in your level of confidence.

Indecision is another common breakdown. Indecision is defined as wavering between two or more possible courses of action. Indecision starts from a lack of resolution or decisiveness in the planning and programming phase of the routine.

Anytime you have two options about how to perform, your body becomes confused because you have not committed to a clear plan of action.
For example, when a golfer cannot decide on what club to use to hit and is vacillating between hitting a seven or eight iron, he is indecisive or undecided. If indecision remains until you execute the shot, it will lead to an indecisive swing. This can change the tempo and time of the golfer’s swing all because he is undecided about the club he has selected.

Fear or anxiety is a mental breakdown that can disrupt a focused routine. Most fear stems from thinking about the results of your action such as missing a shot, striking out, allowing a score to occur, or losing a match. If a batter is afraid to strike out, he is focused too much on outcomes instead of execution. Not only is this an error in focus, but the batter will also approach the at-bat cautiously, afraid to strike out.

Over analysis can certainly cause a breakdown in your routine. Thinking too much, analyzing your game, focusing too much on technique, and worrying about the conditions or the environment are all examples of over analysis. Many perfectionists have trouble with over analysis or too much thinking. In sports, trying hard does not always help you perform better.

For example, there was a competitive skaters who are too focused on the details of skating such as technique. Their pre-performance routine breaks down even before they get into their skating routine because they worry too much about perfect technique or form.

Rushing your routine can also cause a breakdown as you may skip important components in the routine. Rushing can happen for many reasons, but the most common are when you are anxious and want to get your performance started or finished quickly or when you are working within a time limit or trying to make up time.

Golfers sometimes fall behind the group playing ahead and rush their pre-shot routines to get back into position. When you are rushing your routine, the planning and programming stages of the routine suffer during the most important part of the mental routine.

Lack of trust can cause a mental breakdown in the routine when confidence is low or you are afraid to fail. Trust happens when you are into your performance; it can be sabotaged even before you begin your performance. You can sabotage trust by thinking too much about technique of the “how to” of your performance, trying too hard, over controlling your body, or getting tense from fear of failure. The baseball pitcher that tries too hard to throw a perfect pitch or throw hard is an example of how trust will break down.

Laziness or a lack of mental discipline during the routine not only can lead to a breakdown but often results in not having a routine at all. This is less common with high-level athletes, but necessary to mention. You might have heard of the phrase “going through the motions,” which falls under a lack of discipline. When you are going through the motions in your routine, you are executing the physical parts of the routine, without intensity or focus. You are present physically, but not mentally dialed into your routine.

**Identifying Your Breakdowns**

Being aware of your routine breakdowns is an important part to helping you make adjustments to put your mind back on track. Table 10 lists the common routine breakdowns. Your job is to rank your breakdowns from most common to least common.

**Ranking Your Breakdowns**

Answer Yes or No to the following:
• Doubt/Lack of confidence _____
• Indecision ______
• Fear or anxiety ______
• Over analysis ______
• Rushing the routine ______
• Lack of trust ______
• Laziness ______
• Lack of discipline ______
• Other: ______

**How to Get Back on Track**

If your pre-shot or pre-performance routine breaks down, what can you do to get back on track? The answer depends upon the sport and the task you are performing. In some sports, you can’t stop and regroup like you can when batting in baseball. The goal is to be able to catch yourself when you get out of your normal routine and reset or refocus your mind.

In self-paced tasks such as a golf shot, tennis serve, bowling, or free throw in basketball, for example, athletes should stop and restart the routine over if they get distracted, have doubt, or are out of their normal routine in any way. I instruct athletes to stop their routine if they have doubt or indecision about the current golf shot;, try to clear the distraction from their mind;, and re-engage with their routine from an earlier step.

Restarting your routine may not be possible in some sports with continuous action, like hockey, swimming, or in the middle of a rally in tennis in which you are not controlling the pace of play.

Therefore, I teach athletes in this instance to refocus quickly “on the fly.” This requires that you learn to quickly recognize distractions or interruptions and equally as fast, get your head back on task.

You saw the importance of refocusing quickly if you watched a track and field event like the 100 or 400 meter run. A runner gets two false starts in their heat. I one has a false start the sprinters’ entire routine was out of sync because they were required to return to the start line and immediately get ready for a re-start. In this situation, the runners had to engage mentally with the later parts of their routine quickly as they set up in the blocks again.

The process for dealing with a breakdown in your pre-performance preparation is as follows:

1. List the top three or four ways that your mind may wander or get distracted during your pre-performance routine
2. Be aware and catch yourself when you get off task or your routine breaks down.
3. Refocus on the fly as needed or restart your routine from an earlier stage to clear your mind of the distraction and get back on task.

The simple question you should ask yourself is this: “What should I focus on right now to execute this play, shot, or routine?” I use a simple three-step method to help you remember how to refocus. This is called the Three R’s for Refocusing, To review - The Three R’s for Refocusing Are:

• Recognize—that you are not on task or are out of your mental routine.
• Regroup—and break the current distraction or thought.
• Refocus—on the task-relevant cues of the next play, shot, or routine.

Again, the refocusing process requires that you recognize when you aren’t following your regular routine. Ideally, you want to catch yourself before you start to execute so you can regroup and refocus with a clear mind on the task. Recognizing you are distracted is only for the purpose of helping you refocus on the task and engage with your routine.
Final Thoughts on Pre-shot Routines
The pre-shot routine is a very important component in mental game coaching. The performance barriers athletes experience can be linked to a lack of pre-performance preparation. The top three mental strength skills I emphasize are:

- Focus
- Confidence
- Trust

These are the foundational elements of an athlete's routine. These are universal, no matter what the sport or task. The following summarizes the important mental skills you can integrate into pre-shot routines in your sport.

The mental strength skills applied in the pre-shot routine include:

1. Letting go of the past play, pitch, shot, or run (Composure)
2. A specific plan of action (Decision Making & Strategy)
3. Mental and/or physical rehearsal (Imagery)
4. Focus on task-relevant cues (Concentration)
5. Belief in ability to execute the plan (Confidence)
6. The ability to react instinctively (Trust)

As you can see, the above concepts in sports psychology fit nicely into what happens during the pre-shot routine. For example, concentration training and focusing on the process relates directly to helping an athlete identify task-relevant cues or behaviors in the pre-shot routine and the ability to refocus when out of his normal routine.

Program Yourself for Success
One of the goals of the pre-shot routine is to help you feel confident and comfortable when it is time to execute the shot, serve, or performance. Comfort translates into confidence.

What can you do during the routine to feel confident? You should implement a mental rehearsal of the desired performance prior to execution. You must see it before you can achieve it. Using imagery is one way that can kick start your confidence during the routine.

Positive self-talk can help you to get into a confident state of mind. You are your own coach when you are in the middle of a tennis match or golf round. As such, you have control over the internal dialogue that athletes maintain during their performance. This internal dialogue, also called self-talk, can be positive and enhance confidence or can be negative and destructive to confidence.

When you are in the zone and performing a peak levels, the mind is calm, you have confidence, and are using your imagination to see and feel execution before it happens.

Self-talk is at a minimum when performing in the zone. But entering and staying is the zone doesn’t happen enough for most athletes.
Self-talk can be a powerful tool to help give the boost of confidence you need to jump-start your performance. The dialogue you carry on with yourself is similar to being the most positive coach you know. For example, you can use successes or achievements from past practice or performances to boost how you are feeling in the present moment.

Here are some specific examples of power self-talk:

- I’ve hit this shot a thousand times before, the golfer says before hitting a routine drive.
- You beat this guy before several times, you can do it again, says the tennis player who is down one set to his competitor.
- Let’s nail this final shot, the shooter says to himself during his pre-shot routine.
- I’ve stuck this dismount a hundred times in practice, says a gymnast prior to her beam dismount.

Thus, confidence comes from two mental skills you can apply during your pre-shot routine. Both mental imagery and self-talk can be integrated into your regular routine.

**Stick with the Plan**

Like Scott Hoch’s story discussed in the introduction of this book, I am sure you have had instances of indecision or questioned your plan at just the wrong time. The moment you start your windup for a pitch, begin your tennis serve, or start your backswing is not the right time to question your decision(s). The failure to adhere to a plan of action can ruin flow and rhythm and adversely impact performance.

This is why it is important to have a plan in place and stick with it. Indecision in the planning stage will lead to an indecisive performance. The gymnast who changes her prepared beam routine at the last second will be uncommitted on the beam and make more mistakes. The decision making phase of the routine is very important to helping you execute your performance successfully.

Whether you are planning your serve location, picking a pitch, selecting a target, or making any other decision about how you will perform, you need to be decisive and commit to your decisions. I suggest you designate a point in your routine where you are committed to a plan and will not change the plan after that point. This time is usually after the planning and programming phase but before you begin the procedural phase.

**Checking Your Mental and Physical State**

One mental strength skill I have not discussed, which you can apply to your routines, is simple relaxation exercises. For example, you can use simple breathing exercises to clear your mind at the start of your pre-shot routine and to eliminate excess muscular tension. Abdominal breathing an excellent means of reducing excess tension you hold in the shoulder and neck region.

You want to check in with yourself for two reasons. The first reason is to let go of the last play, shot, or routine. The second is to adjust your arousal level prior to the planning and programming stage of the routine. The frustration you carried over from a previous play or shot can cause you to change your approach on the current play or shot.

Another simple relaxation exercise I teach is to “tighten and release” muscular tension away. Contracting and then relaxing a particular muscle group is effective for reducing excess tension. You can reduce tension in your arms and shoulders by fully shrugging your shoulders and then releasing this tension. You can use this technique to reduce tension in any muscle group.

Often, you must fully contract a muscle to reduce muscular tension in that area. Contract the muscles where you store tension for about six seconds and then release the tension.
Be Consistent but Not Compulsive
A pre-shot or pre-performance routine allows you to prepare for performance consistently. My philosophy is that erratic preparation leads to inconsistent performance. You want to try to apply your routine consistently by using the same thoughts and behaviors to trigger your performance, but you don’t want to become obsessed with doing the exact same thing every time. Consistency in the physical part of your preparation helps you to keep your pre-performance thoughts and images consistent.

There are those athletes in golf, shooting, skating, and others sports who think too much about performing a perfect routine and get distracted from the real purpose of the routine, to perform well.

The goal is not to be perfect in how you approach each play or performance; rather, your goal is to prepare your mind and body for consistent execution and high levels of performance.

Wrap-Up
Most sports challenge your ability to concentrate because of the stop and go quality of play. Sports such as tennis, golf, bowling, shooting, and many others demand that an athlete’s focus increases and decreases as the demands of the sport change. For this reason, pre-performance routines are an excellent resource to help athletes click on and off their focus, as the demands of the sport change.

As an athlete, you must focus in and be ready to perform when the whistle blows. You cannot focus perfectly at every moment of competition. However, with the use of a pre-shot routine, you can have the advantage of recognizing when you are off task and doing your best to refocus before you hit the shot, make your pitch, or start your performance.

A final recommendation is to develop a routine that works best for you and to apply your routine first in practice. Do not wait until competition starts to search out a new pre-shot routine. You first must become comfortable with the thoughts and images of your routine so you can then focus you energy on performing your best.
Postgame Assessment For Greater Confidence

Assessing Your Performance for Greater Confidence

If self-confidence is the name of the game in sports, it's critical that you learn how to grow your confidence after each competition, instead of rip it apart with self-critical thinking.

Part of my “confidence coaching” when working with students is to help them assess their performance positively in order to grow or keep confidence.

Do you beat yourself up, get upset, and lose confidence after a poor performance in a game or race? You are not alone. Many athletes I work with—as many as 75%—reprimand themselves after a defeat or a loss. Sometimes this is human nature: wanting to perform as well as you can each time you compete.

But the reality is that you can't be in the zone every time you compete. In this booklet, you'll learn the strategies to grow your self-confidence by assessing your performance more wisely.

I think part human nature and society that teaches athletes to be self-critical and dwell on their shortcomings. We know perfectionists, for example, tend to be very self-critical and focus too much on the negatives. How often after you perform, have you looked back and said, "If only I hadn't dropped those two easy passed, we might have won the game."

Many athletes are very quick to focus on what they did wrong after a game and criticize their own performance, which only undermines their confidence. This holds especially true for perfectionist athletes. For these athletes, mistakes and poor performances are an opportunity to dwell on the past and be negative, which can only hold back their confidence.

Highly committed athletes, including perfectionists, hurt their confidence with a harsh attitude about the way they performed.

When reviewing their performance, perfectionists:

- Focus only on the mistakes they made
- Are self-critical of their performance
- Can't remember the good plays or shots
- Disqualify any positive about their performance
- Can't feel satisfied with a good performance because they never feel as if they performed up to their expectations
- Often make false assumptions that others are disappointed with their performance
- View their performance as either good or bad with no in between
- Want to perform perfectly and view less than perfect as a failure

I also see parents, who in their efforts to help their children be superstars instill a critical mindset after they perform: "John, how did you miss those short putts today," a parent says after the round. Often parents are well meaning and want to help their kids improve, but they wrongly focus on their kids’ shortcomings.

Some athletes can reach a state of learned helplessness... They become so down on themselves that they “don’t care anymore” and can lose motivation or desire to train or practice. They feel helpless by believing that nothing will help them win or putt out of a slump. These athletes check out mentally very fast when their performance is not up to standards or they are losing.
They are stuck in a negative cycle.

Top athletes know they must learn from their mistakes and poor performances so they can improve, which leads to improved confidence instead of self-doubt. They don’t become discouraged or feel helpless when they don’t win or perform perfectly. They are able to regroup by assessing their strengths and weaknesses.

The strength of your mental game has everything to do with the level of your confidence. You want to do everything in your power to grow your confidence and be your own best friend after you get off the court, field, rink, or course. But far too many athletes today lose valuable confidence after their performance because they dwell on past mistakes (or a loss) and think they are not good enough.

Unfortunately, athletes learn to be self-critical and judgmental after performing because this is the way they were treated by coaches, parents, and friends.

Let’s move on to what you can do to grow your confidence after each game or performance.

**How to Keep & Grow Confidence After Performances**

Below are the tips for helping you assess your performance for greater confidence. After competition, resist making any judgments. First, cool down immediately after the game or match. When emotions are elevated, it’s easier for you to be self-critical or negative.

Take 20 minutes to relax, get a drink of water, hang out with your friends or family, read a chapter in a book, or find something that will temporarily distract you from your potentially negative or elevated emotions.

**1 - Be More Subjective with Your Performance**

It’s easy to pick on yourself after a game or performance (“I stunk it up today”), but that does not help confidence and your future motivation to train. First, you want to be objective about how you view your performance (instead of subjective). When athletes are subjective, the emotions take over, such as frustration and anger, and that’s when you can be the most self-critical.

How can you be more objective with your game?

Think about this: How would you look at yourself if you stepped into the shoes of the most positive coach you know? What would a positive coach tell you about your performance that would make you feel satisfied or okay about your game? What are two positive things a coach might tell you about your game? No one can help you feel confident, but yourself. You have to take control and think about good things that you did well in the game or performance that make you feel like you contributed to the team. Keep in mind that not everything will go your way—even when you are on fire and playing in the zone!

Pick out two simple areas you can complement yourself about. For example, "You really hit the ball great off the tee today and made a great comeback after a slow start." You are more likely to feel better and be confident when you can focus on what you did well. Let go of being self-critical of your performance especially when doing so feels right to you at that time (when upset or frustrated).

Ask yourself, “what are two things you did well in competition?” and “what did I do well today?” Discuss these first with a teammate, parent, or coach. Don’t just focus on the plays that got away from you. Focus on the parts of your game or performance that you can feel satisfied about. Give yourself the benefit of the doubt.
2 - Use Mistakes as an Opportunity to Improve
I am a believer in using your mistakes (or loses) to help you improve for the next performance. Remember, there is no failure, only feedback.

Once again, you want to be objective here. You want to assess your game statistics like a reporter would. Assessing your statistics can help you decide what you need to work on in the next practice or two to improve those weaker areas of your performance. This can only help give you confidence going into the next competition knowing you have worked hard to improve areas that will help you become a better performer.

3 - Pat Yourself on the Back
Be happy about your good performance or the good plays you made. You are not expected to play great all the time, even though you might think this way! I don’t want you to expect so much of your performance that you can’t feel satisfied when you make good plays or hit good shots. Do not “disqualify the positive” about your performance and think: “I’m supposed to perform that well.”

Athletes with very high expectations, when they perform well, do not take pride in their good performances because they think it was supposed to be great all the time. Reward yourself for playing well instead of being picky about your weaknesses or mistakes.

4 - Switch Roles and Kick Back
When competition is over, it’s time to switch roles into other areas of your life. You are no longer in the role of the athlete!

You are now a student, friend, son or daughter, or person. Leave the golf on the golf course or baseball on the diamond or racing on the track!

You get the idea.

Avoid dwelling on the game and discussing your performance all evening. You need to have balance in your life, not be 24 hours – 7 days a week in the role of the athlete.

Switch roles after you get off the court, course, or track and engross yourself in other roles of your life.

5 - You are More Than a Win/Lose Record
One of the mental traps that athletes fall into is allowing their performance to influence how they think about themselves as persons. If you do this, you can only feel good about yourself when you perform well. And you feel awful about yourself when you under perform or lose.

How well you perform in sports (or any other endeavor) should not influence how you feel about yourself as a person. I never want my athletes to allow their level of success in sports dictate how they feel about themselves as a person. You are more than a win/lose record or a score.

You are a person first who happens to play sports at a high level. This mean you should not evaluate yourself based on how well you perform from day to day. It’s just one day in your life as an athlete.

6 - Focus on What You Need to Improve, Not What Stinks
Instead of thinking about all the reasons you failed or messed up in today’s game, you should instead focus on what you want to improve for the next performance or in next week’s practice.

This requires objectivity as discussed earlier. You can use statistics, for example, to help you focus on improvement.

For example, how many first serves did you get in the box today; what we call first serve percentage?
If you did not serve well, you can look at your statistics and work on the areas to improve. This does not give you permission to be self-critical of your performance. You only want to evaluate statistics to help you focus on what you can do better the next time.

Set small mental game goals for this purpose. If the first day of the golf tournament you were wishy-washy with your reads when putting or with shot selection, you might set a small goal to commit to the plan for your shots and stick to your reads on the greens.

7- Get Used to Rewarding Yourself
It’s easy to be self-critical of your performance especially when you are a perfectionist or others have taught you this behavior.

Honestly, this is common practice for you, which you want to change starting today!

Can your honestly reward yourself for what you did well in today's game?

First, this requires that you let go of expectations about how you were supposed to perform. Second, you’ll need to decide what you should reward yourself for and what rewards you might give yourself.

For example, you can set small goals for each performance, such as to hit 50% of your shots in the field in basketball. Make your goal attainable, not perfectionist-like goals. How will you reward yourself? With an ice cream? Saying “great Job” to yourself? Writing yourself a thank you note? Use whatever works for you within reason.

Wrap-Up
I’m sure you can think about things you did very well in each game or performance—even if you lost. Don’t let a dark cloud hang over your head because you had one bad day on the playing field or made a couple costly mistakes. Remind yourself of the great plays, shots, or routines you have performed. Keep in mind that self-confidence comes from countless practices and games you have had in sports often over years of participation. Do not allow your confidence to slip based on moment-to-moment adversity, such as the last mistake you made or lose you had.

To find more about how mental strength coaching can help your athletic performance contact me at coach@warriormindcoach.com or 408-871-8364