

# VIEWPOINTS

## Physical preparation needs mental prep

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Mental training is one of the most under-developed and under-achieved aspects in sports for athletes, yet it comprises the most important ingredients to succeed on the field.

In fact, mental training, understood and developed as a student-athlete, usually transcends the individual's ability to perform better as a human being in the world. There is a vast amount of research identifying aspects of mental training and the development of the mind to accomplish great things.

**MOST SKEPTICS** believe this is a difficult concept to grasp and cannot fully understand how to approach it, how to develop it, and, most importantly, how to teach it in a way that is conveyed with clarity and vision.

In conducting mental training, one will learn how to calm the mind, use the mind and control the mind into believing all things are possible with those who have faith, trust and respect for the process. In doing so, there will be an eventual transformation, and switch from the clouded and confused mind to the clear and concise mind. This will allow the athlete to perform under extreme pressure situations and result in better success on and off the field.

**I OFTEN ASK PEOPLE** what separates two equally-talented, physically-capable athletes? Most collegiate players were at the top of their game prior to college, from Little League through high school. During those years of maturation, the athlete's physical ability usually resulted in the athlete's success, coupled with a great deal of practice.

There was either the one who was just naturally talented with great physical ability who dominated locally, or there was the one who practiced

hard, practiced often and trained to be better. There was no mental-training aspect to this development. Sometimes, the person's coach played in a weak division, weak league or entered weak tournaments in order to train the athlete that they were great, because they kept winning games and receiving trophies.

**THIS APPROACH** usually starts well but ends badly. When that athlete finishes high school and then enters collegiate sports, they experience something unprecedented. They are now in a field of similar athletes who were provided with the same training, and who dominated similar-type local school, town and travel programs. In essence, they no longer feel "special." And when they encounter failure, they no longer feel "capable."

At this cross road, many athletes become lost. Most have never experienced failure, so it is a foreign concept, and their minds race with indecision, doubt and complexity.

When an athlete fails after extensive practice, what can they do? In order to succeed at a more challenging level, the mind comes into play. And this is where mental training becomes a critical ingredient to an athlete's success. Mental training will allow the athlete to embrace failure, understand what it is, and realize that it is a necessary component of one's development to success.

There has never been success without failure. The paradox here is that when you fail, you gain knowledge, vision and insight and have a path to greatness, and we usually learn more about ourselves through failure than success.

**TEACHING MENTAL** training is challenging, inspiring and rewarding. Most athletes have never experienced mental training, yet they are attempting to compete at the collegiate level and seek greatness. When the athlete does not succeed as they did before college, they become frustrated, anxious

and confused. This can lead to more disappointment and failure if not properly understood and embraced.

### The Nine Mental Skills That Successful Athletes Have

The Ohio Center for Sports Psychology has identified nine mental skills necessary for successful athletes. These nine skills should be analyzed at the collegiate level when building your team. These skills should be taught, practiced and part of the culture of your organization. There is no doubt these skills can be learned and practiced and incorporated in all aspects of life, not just sports. A brief synopsis of the nine mental skills is contained below:

#### 1. Maintaining a positive attitude.

Attitude is such a powerful word. It embraces so many aspects of our life, and for student-athletes, it can be the difference maker in starting or sitting on the bench. Successful athletes realize that attitude is a choice. That choice is something that defines your character, and maintaining a positive attitude to your sport and life will define the person you are and represent how you display yourself to the world.

As philosopher and psychologist William James once said, "The greatest discovery of any generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitude." Successful athletes understand this and maintain a great attitude with a regulated mental approach.

#### 2. Being motivated to achieve results.

Motivation is something that many talk about, but few truly understand. Motivation depends in large part on goal setting. Without goals, it is difficult to be motivated. Successful athletes are aware of the rewards that come with hard work and can persist when times get tough and failure is present. They understand that the rewards do not come immediately — this occurs through motivation and a deep desire



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to succeed or accomplish the goal that was set. The research shows that when the athlete sets the goal, the motivation is more prevalent than when some extrinsic force (such as a parent) seeks to set the goal for the athlete and compel motivation.

#### 3. Goals and commitment to the task.

Goals are a cornerstone of successful athletes and the achievements they have. Successful athletes always set goals that are realistic, measurable and time-oriented. Those three components are important to the goal-setting process, as it allows the athlete to identify the goal and set a timetable to achieve it. This then triggers the motivation we spoke about earlier.

Without a proper commitment, a goal is nothing more than a fantasy. Successful athletes are committed to their goals and willing to carry out the necessary daily demands of their training program to attain their goal.

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### 4. Good communication and people skills.

This is one of those overlooked aspects of athletic performance.

Successful athletes realize that they are a cog in the wheel — a piece of a larger puzzle that includes everyone from teammates, family, friends, coaches, etc. In understanding this, successful athletes eliminate or minimize drama and understand conflict compromise solutions. They are usually part of the solution and not part of the problem.

### 5. Self-talk.

People think of self-talk as the athlete sitting in a corner rambling hymns and chanting. Self-talk is an inner peace and can be non-verbal. It allows the athlete to embrace those inner thoughts and feelings which cannot be controlled. Successful athletes maintain confidence and understand that they cannot control the result, but they can control their confidence.

Therefore, they don't focus on the negative or the future that has not yet arrived. Instead, self-talk is used to regulate and maintain balance of their inner thoughts and feelings. In doing so, it creates a mental state of confidence and feeling the ability to accomplish something is reachable.

### 6. Mental imagery to visualize success.

Mental imagery is a critical component to mental training and to helping athletes achieve success. Successful athletes consistently prepare themselves for competition by imagining a successful result where they are the "headline."

If you cannot see yourself in a successful position, how can you ever get there? Successful athletes create specific, identifiable and realistic mental images. This can be used before, during and after competition. Mental imagery is an important ingredient in becoming an athlete with sound mind and body.

### 7. Dealing effectively with anxiety.

Anxiety and worrying are like a rocking chair — it gives you something to do, but gets you nowhere. Successful athletes accept that anxiety is part of the process and the sport they play. Anxiety can be used as fuel for the athlete in performance, but can also become a sword preventing the athlete from achieving maximum performance. Successful athletes do not shy away from anxiety. They channel its benefits and minimize its weaknesses to be in a controlled environment.

### 8. Dealing effectively with emotions.

Do not allow your emotions to obscure your sense of collective judgment. Successful athletes embrace emotions that include excitement, anger and disappointment as part

of the experience. These emotions can be used to positively influence the athlete in a direction of success, rather than interfere with high-level performance. When dealing with emotions, successful athletes regulate the emotions to fit the situation to make sure not to allow emotions to distract from the performance.

### 9. Concentration.

Concentration is difficult to teach, but easy to speak about. Concentration is mental effort placed on sensory or mental events; a person's ability to exert deliberate mental effort on what is most important in any given situation.

Successful athletes understand the game situation and look for important cues during competition. Looking for cues, however, can only be accomplished with concentration, focus and a deliberate sense of knowing where you are at all times. Successful athletes do this well and have a "sixth sense."

Successful athletes learn how to maintain focus and resist distractions, whether they come from the environment or from within themselves. Many times during competition, distractions are prevalent. Successful athletes can regain their focus when concentration is lost during competition.

The nine mental skills identified in this article should give you a brief understanding of mental training and the benefits it offers. Many of these skills can be taught, cultivated and practiced to achieve peak performance.

Mental training in sports covers more than simply success and performance on the playing field. It embraces many aspects of our life and allows an individual to constantly learn and develop their relationship with the world.

I will leave you with a great quote from martial artist and actor Bruce Lee, which sums up mental training and should allow you to think past this article. He said, "Defeat is a state of mind; No one is ever defeated until defeat has been accepted as a reality".

Enjoy your season, embrace these skills and consider mental training as part of your future development regimen.