

# FINDING SUCCESS

## Physical readiness relies on mental prep

By **JOSEPH MANISCALCO**

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.

Yogi Berra once said, "Baseball is 90 percent mental. The other half is physical." That statement was made way before the introduction of mental training, yet encompasses (in a Yogi-ism) precisely what we are talking about.

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, more 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 a switch from a mind that is clouded and confused, to one that is clear and concise. This article will provide some clarity and deliverables to introduce to student-athletes as part of their mental training.

### How Do You Distinguish Equal Physical Ability?

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. On one hand, the naturally-

talented athlete's great physical ability dominated locally, while on the other hand, the one who practiced hard, practiced often, and trained to be better succeeded on the field as well.

No mental training existed. Instead, it was pure physical skills and those skills statistically added up to victory. Couple that with weak leagues and tournaments, and we end up with many trophies and medals.

If the story ended here, most would say, "What's the problem?" This approach usually starts well, but ends badly. When that athlete finishes high school and enters collegiate sports, she experiences something entirely different and unprecedented.

She is now in a field with similar athletes who were provided with the same physical training and dominated similar-type local school, town and travel programs. What happens is the athlete no longer feels special. And when she encounters failure, she no longer feels capable.

At this crossroad, many athletes become lost, confused, and the scrambled eggs fester in the mental chamber of their mind. Since failure is a foreign concept, their mind races with indecision, doubt and complexity. 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, insight, and have a path to greatness, and we usually learn more about ourselves through failure than success.

While our Western culture always looks outward, the Eastern culture of training and development looks inward – which is to see thyself, work the inner feelings and understand yourself. This is at the core of mental training.

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 10 Mental Skills That Successful Athletes Have

Below are 10 simple mental skills that you can identify and incorporate into your development. These 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 program. There is no doubt these skills can be learned and practiced and incorporated in all aspects of life, not just sports.

#### 1. Maintain 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 for your sport and life will define the person you are and represent how you display yourself to the world. As philosopher 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. Motivation Leads to Results.

Motivation is something that many talk about, but few truly understand. Motivation is the charge in your inner self. It is the fuel to the engine that propels action. Motivation, however, 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



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get tough and failure is present. They understand that the rewards do not come immediately. Instead, it occurs through motivation and a deep desire to succeed or accomplish the goal that was set. When an athlete sets the goal, the motivation is more prevalent than when some extrinsic force (i.e. parent or coach) seeks to set the goal for the athlete and compel motivation. Without motivation, you are a ship lost at sea without a destination.

#### 3. Goals and Commitment.

Goals are the cornerstone of successful athletes and their achievements. 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 triggers the motivation factor and they work together. Without a proper commitment, a goal is nothing more than a fantasy. Successful athletes are committed to their goals and willing to

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## LUNA HAVING SUCCESS IN MULTIPLE SOFTBALL AREAS

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which was rebranded the NFCA Texas High School Leadoff Classic a few years ago through a partnership with the Association, continues to thrive. He said carrying the NFCA name gives the event even more credibility and gives him a chance to sing the praises of an Association he firmly believes in.

“It’s a great way to build the high

school area (of the membership),” Luna said. “It’s an honor to be able to represent the NFCA (and) it’s a really cool deal to be able to tag you on social media and show you off.”

And running an elite tournament well shows what one of the many talented coaches in the NFCA can accomplish. Luna especially shines when weather inevitably forces changes to the extensive and intricate tournament, which is staged at multiple locations in the area.

“My assistants call me the ‘Mad

Hatter’ in those situations,” he joked, referencing the fictional character in Lewis Carroll's 1865 book, “Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,” who makes sense of the madness around him. “It’s part of it. It’s just ‘leave me alone and let me (re-) do it.’”

He said the tournament offers a chance to be in the spotlight for some smaller teams that aren’t able to travel outside of the state to big events.

“It’s done a great job (getting teams) exposure,” Luna noted.

He said he has enjoyed his time on the NFCA Board, and enjoys the feeling that everyone is valued equally and are all working toward the common goal of growing the game.

“My biggest goal is to continue to increase our (membership) numbers, especially in Texas,” Luna said. “It’s been a great experience. My perspective is just as important as the Division I representative, or the Executive Director. It’s everything I expected and more.”

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carry out the necessary daily demands of their training program to attain their goal.

### 4. Good Communication 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 compromises solutions. They are usually part of the solution and not part of the problem. Communication with your teammates, parents, those who support you and coaches is vital to your development as a person and student-athlete. Without communication, your mind scrambles with indecision, and indecision will always lead to the wrong decision.

### 5. Positive 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 behavior. As a result, 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 inner thoughts and feelings. In doing so, it creates a mental state of confidence and feeling that the ability to accomplish something is

reachable. Maintaining positive self-talk keeps you present.

### 6. Mental Imagery to Visualize Success.

Mental imagery is a critical component to mental training and to helping athletes achieve success. I often explain mental imagery to athletes and help them see the outcome before it occurs. While this can be confusing, once grasped, it is the essential ingredient of everything you do in life. 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 With Anxiety.

Anxiety and worrying are like a rocking chair – it will give you something to do, but gets you nowhere. Anxiety can be controlled. A forward-thinking and growth mindset will allow anxiety to be minimized. 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 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. Controlling Your 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 learn how to maintain focus and resist distractions, whether they come from the environment or from within themselves. Often during competition, distractions are prevalent. Successful athletes can regain their focus when concentration is lost during competition. Successful athletes understand the game situation and look for important cues during competition. This is the IQ aspect of the game. Looking for cues 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 for it. A perfect

example of this is the Derek Jeter play in the 2001 Major League Baseball Playoffs against the Oakland Athletics, when he was in the right position at the right time to flip the ball to the catcher.

### 10. Change Your Mindset.

Successful athletes have a forward-looking, positive mindset. Mindset starts when you open your eyes and continues each day with your vocabulary, what you see and what you hear. Successful athletes are cognizant of these factors and know that a strong mindset propels action. Change your mindset. Change your life.

Hopefully, these skills provide you with 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.

A great quote from Bruce Lee sums up mental training like this: “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.

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