rest and recover. In addition, devote a day off can provide time for athletes to take a break…sometimes I work out 4 days on and then 2 days off. Three days on and one day off.”

Train for Competition: As Dan said, “Every day we train like we want to compete. Every day it’s maximum effort.” Clearly, how athletes practice influences how they compete. So having your athletes put forth maximum effort and focus in practice will be a key to their success. But how do you prepare your athletes for the different situations they are likely to face in competition? Throughout training, Coach Sloan simulates competitive situations and thus puts Dan in the position of having to perform under a variety of conditions. Doing so gives Dan the chance to prepare physically and, perhaps more importantly, mentally, for competition.

For example, if practice has been going well, Coach Sloan may start a simulation, such as describing an upcoming decathlon and then having Dan compete an event as if he is actually at that meet. Coach Sloan tries to duplicate the physical and mental environments that Dan is likely to face in the meet so that he is prepared for anything that may come his way during the actual competition.

Summary: Clearly there is much to be learned from how Dan and Coach Sloan prepare for competition. Setting goals, learning to “get up” for competition, and simulating competitive situations are all things that you can incorporate in your training and practices to help improve your individual or your team’s performance.

(Answer: Dan won only one event, the 400 meters, but performed well enough in all the others to win the gold medal.)

For more information on Dan O’Brien, visit his website at: www.danobrien.com

Editor’s Note
Courtney Albinson, M.A.

The UNT Center for Sport Psychology would like to extend a millennium welcome to all the coaches, athletes and other sport personnel who receive our newsletter! We hope you have had a joyful holiday season. The Center is moving into the 21st Century with a flurry of activity. In addition to our other ongoing research projects, we have begun a new project assessing athletes’ attitudes about the use and practice of sport psychology. With this knowledge, we will be able to more successfully design and implement programs that address the unique needs of athletes and sport programs. The Center also will host a “Coaching to Win” workshop/discussion that will bring together coaches, athletes and sports media from the North Texas area to discuss their thoughts and strategies on how to mentally and physically prepare to be your best.

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The only way to overcome is to hang in, even I’m starting to believe them.”

Dan O’Brien Set Performance Goals: Simply stated, with a performance goal, the athlete focuses on improving relative to some past behavior, such as increasing first serve percentage to 70% or swimming a race in 1:04 instead of 1:08. With an outcome goal, the athlete focuses on some overall standard of performance, such as placing second in a tournament or winning the race. Performance goals have the advantage of being under your control - they do not depend on your competition, only on how you perform. In fact, many top-level coaches and athletes emphasize this perspective when setting goals because it gives them a gauge against which to measure performances and determine their improvement. As Dan stated, “You’re competing against yourself out there...I know that if I can hammer each and every event, I don’t have to worry about the other competitors.” So when setting goals, remember this distinction and set those that will create the most positive, motivating, and productive training and competitive environments for you and your athletes.

(Triivia: Of the 10 individual events in the decathlon, how many did Dan O’Brien win in the 1996 Olympic games? Five? Ten? The answer is at the end of this article.)

Learn to “Get Up” for Competition: Depending on the sport and the individual, the optimal level of mental and physical arousal will vary. Thus, athletes need to identify their optimal state and then learn how to achieve it on a consistent basis. According to Coach Sloan, the way to do this is to prepare your athletes to be successful for the Big Competition • Clarity of Focus for Performance Success

(continued on back page)

The Physical & Mental Preparation of the World’s Greatest Athlete

The UNT Center for Sport Psychology Website can be reached at: http://www.sportpsych.unt.edu

By Trent A. Petrie, Ph.D.

Dan O’Brien

The Physical & Mental Preparation of the World’s Greatest Athlete

The answer is 8. Dan O’Brien won the 100 meters, 200 meters, 400 meters, long jump, pole vault, discus, javelin and 1500 meters.

Preparation

At the 1999 Conference for the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP), I and other members of the center’s staff had the opportunity to meet Dan O’Brien and his coach, Rick Sloan. Dan is the 1996 Olympic Gold Medalist in the decathlon and currently is training for the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia. Rick, a former Olympic decathlete himself, is the head track coach at Washington State University (WSU). Rick has been Dan’s coach since 1989. Although their talk at the conference focused on Dan’s preparation for the decathlon, their approach has bearing regardless of the sport in which you compete. With their permission, I highlight some of their wise council on how to prepare physically and mentally to perform your best.

Always Have a Goal: As we have discussed in previous newsletters, goals play a key role in maintaining focus and motivation. For Dan and Coach Sloan, this could not be truer. In 1991 Dan won the World Championship in Tokyo and was one of the favorites going into the 1992 Olympics. Unfortunately, though, Dan did not medal in the 1992 Olympics. In the 1995 World Championships, he did medal in the decathlon and then went on to win the 1996 Olympic Games. Dan and Coach Sloan set a new goal – beating the world record, which Dan did in September of that year at a decathlon in France. How Dan and Coach Sloan addressed this obstacle is a great example of how coaches and athletes can respond to the challenges and disappointments that arise in sport and of how goals can keep you on track for a successful performance.

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Summary:
Preparing for the Big Competition Game

By Karen D. Cogan, Ph.D.

It’s the day of the big competition. There is still an opportunity to watch the preliminaries, or win or conference or show off your talent. And you need to do. But how do you cope with the pressures to perform in these highly competitive situations?

To answer these questions, athletes have a plan to help them deal with the stress and anxiety that often accompanies big events. Without a plan, you are more vulnerable to the negative effects of high pressure. Every athlete needs to know his or her personal way of dealing with pressure; what works for one may not work for another. The important thing is to find what works for you. Below are some ideas that have been used by successful athletes. You might try them out by incorporating these or others of your own choosing, until you find a plan that helps you.

First let’s start with some things you can do throughout the season.

• Incorporate mental skills such as imagery, relaxation, and goal-setting into your workouts. Allot time during each workout for the education, practice, and reinforcement of these skills. For example, you might take a few minutes each day to imagine yourself in your events competing at a big event.

• Develop physical and mental pre-competition routines; use them daily in practice and competition to make them automatic. By rehearsing routines, athletes can prepare both physically and mentally for the big game.

• Make the practice conditions as similar to the competition environment as possible. Incorporate possible distractions into daily workouts, such as music, while you work out, to simulate what your team/athletes will experience in the big game.

• Make back-up plans. Expect the unexpected, and be prepared. Then when the unexpected happens, you won’t panic and will respond intelligently (e.g., bring extra equipment in case of rain). A good back-up plan helps speed up recovery time, ensuring you are ready for the next competition.

• Plan for how you will deal with the media. The big competition may be the athlete’s first exposure to media attention. Anticipate flashing cameras, noisy reporters and how you will deal with them.

• Plan for how you will deal with fans or friends who are attending the competition. Think about how much time, if any, you will be willing to spend with them. Anticipate how you will react to their viewing your performance, particularly if they have not regularly attended your competitions.

• Put your stuff in place. Make sure all equipment and personal items will be available when needed.

• Before the competition, don’t introduce major changes in techniques. Major changes at this time can be disruptive. Rely on previously acquired skills that have been well-rehearsed and perfected.

• Maintain your regular physical training program. Usually, you want to go into big events much the same as you go into any other competition. Do your ordinary pre-event running, strength training, speed and agility drills, and whatever else you usually do. In consultation with your coach, you may also choose to taper your training for optimal performance. But don’t change your routine too much just because it is a big event.

Here are some things you and your athletes can do just before the big competition.

• Maintain your usual eating and sleeping patterns. Eat the foods that you prefer and that give you an optimal amount of energy. Try to get an adequate amount of rest before a big event. Some athletes, though, find it hard to sleep the night before an important competition. If this is the case for you, you might want to consider your sleep (or at least reduce your anxiety) if those strategies do not work, don’t worry about it. Your adrenaline will help you the next day.

• Arrive early to familiarize yourself with new surroundings. Check out the facilities in advance, if possible. Know where you have to report, and what time you have to work out with it (e.g., if the pool is cold, the field is bumpy)!

• Eliminate any possible distractions from developing plans to cope with stressors and anxiety that come with intense competition. Find what works for you and make it a part of your routine. Then go out and “Just Do It.”

• Dress to win. Wear what makes you feel comfortable and ready to perform well. Supplementation or not, dress rituals (e.g., wearing your lucky blue socks) can be helpful and important. Just remember what you wear and how you wear it is not the major reason for your success.

• Have fun! Having fun and enjoying yourself during the big competition will give you more-furnish energy and keep you relaxed. For example, you might choose a cue word that reminds you to keep it fun and repeat the cue word to yourself as you approach the competition.

• If you have trained hard physically for the big competition, that’s good, but you can only be partially prepared. Preparing for the big competition means being mentally prepared as well. Coaches and athletes can move from developing plans to cope with stressors and anxiety that come with intense competition. Find what works for you and make it a part of your routine. Then go out and “Just Do It.”

• Recognize that experiencing some anxiety is normal. Don’t get too anxious about being anxious. Some pre-competition nervousness may be useful. Stashbaum to Troy’s first Superbowl appearance to gain a better perspective on how to prepare and what to expect.

The big competition may be the athlete’s first exposure to media attention. Anticipate flashing cameras, noisy reporters and how you will deal with them.

 Athletes and coaches realize the importance of mental training when the best athletic performance possible.

The general consensus seems to be that well the athlete is focused, the better the final results. In many cases, athletes are aware of only those things that are critical to performance. What is sometimes missing is an awareness of the factors that lead to the success or failure of the performance. For example, in the heat of the game, the athlete may be paying attention to the negative things that are contributing to the failure. For many sports situations there is usually a ‘focus zone’ where the athlete sees something that leads to or unlocks correct performance.

How is an Important Focus

One way to quickly recover focus is to develop performance ‘routines’ that are directed towards productive things (e.g., a symbol, a focal point, and a cue word that lead to achieving performance success. A symbol can be any tangible item in the environment that redirects the athlete’s attention to the present moment. For example, the pitching rubber on the mound, the free throw line in basketball, strings on the tennis racquet or a sign from the coach could serve as a signal for the athlete to think in the present moment.

The most important part of an athlete’s focus is to help them deal with the stress and anxiety that often accompanies big events. Without a plan, you are more vulnerable to the negative effects of high pressure. Every athlete needs to know his or her personal way of dealing with pressure; what works for one may not work for another. The important thing is to find what works for you. Below are some ideas that have been used by successful athletes. You might try them out by incorporating these or others of your own choosing, until you find a plan that helps you.
It’s the day of the big competition. This is your chance to tell your story, to reach your final victory, or to show the world who you are. The pressure to perform is real, and it can be overwhelming. With the right mindset, however, you can overcome these challenges and achieve your goals.

Preparing for the Big Competition Game

By: Karen D. Cogan, Ph.D.

The Big Game is here! As a competitor, you need to be physically and mentally ready for the big game. Here are some tips to help you succeed:

1. **Incubate mental skills such as imagery, relaxation, and goal-setting into your workouts.** Allot time during each workout for the education, practice, and reinforcement of these important skills. For example, you might take a few minutes each day to imagine yourself in a game scenario before starting your practice.

2. **Develop and maintain physical and mental preparation routines.** Use them daily in practice and competition to make them automatic. By rehearsing routines, athletes can prepare both physically and mentally for the big game.

3. **Make the practice conditions as similar as possible to the competition conditions.** In practice, you can control the environment, but in competition, you cannot. Therefore, it is important to make your practice as similar as possible to the competition. This will help you feel more comfortable and confident when you take the field.

4. **Maintain your physical state.** Eat the foods that you need to replenish your energy; drink water to stay hydrated; and groom yourself to look your best.

5. **Recognize that experiencing some anxiety or fear is normal.** Don’t get too anxious about being anxious. Some pre-competition nervousness may be beneficial. However, it can be overwhelming and affect your performance. Take steps to control your nervousness, such as taking deep breaths, practicing relaxation techniques, or focusing on the present moment.

6. **Keep your focus.** If you are too focused on your performance, you may lose your edge. Instead, focus on the task at hand and the people around you.

7. **Be ready for anything.** The unexpected happens in competition. Anticipate flashing cameras, nosy reporters, and opponents. You need to be ready for these situations and be able to stay calm and focused.

8. **Monitor your body language.** Your body language can communicate your confidence or lack thereof to others. Keep your body language positive and strong.

9. **Listen to your coach.** Your coach has experience and knowledge that can help you succeed. Follow their advice and make adjustments as needed.

10. **Keep a positive attitude.** A positive attitude is key to success. Stay focused on the task at hand and avoid negative self-talk.

Remember to focus on the three Ps of Success:

- **Positive Focus:** In pressures situations, the best athletes have chosen negative thoughts over positive ones. They expect to succeed because they know they are prepared and are willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done. They can tell you exactly what they intend to do, in positively worded phrases, to accomplish the task at hand.

- **Positive Performance:** Successful athletes approach each moment in competition as if it were the only one. They don’t dwell on the last play or point or shot or race nor are they thinking about the next one. They focus on the present moment and the only moment that counts is the next one. The only moment that counts is the only moment that we can control.

- **Positive Preparation:** Coaches and athletes should focus on what can be done to get ready to perform successfully. Preparing for the competition routine that utilizes symbols, targets, and cue words in this manner is that athletes can have a clearer sense of what works best for them to maximize performance success. Obviously, key elements of the competition routine have already been discussed beforehand, but this can easily be done with the assistance of the coach, according to a popular positive psychology consultant. Focusing is a skill, and like any skill, it can be improved with practice.

By: Scott Martin, Ph.D. and Peggy Richardson, Ph.D.
some time to mental training (possibly on the days when you are not physically training), which is an excellent complement to physical preparation. As a young athlete, Dan would work out 6 days a week and then rest one day. Now I am smarter about it. I’ll definitely take 2-3 days a week on break…sometimes I work out 4 days on and then 2 days off. Three days on and one day off.”

Train for Competition: As Dan said, “Every day we train like we want to compete. Every day it’s maximum effort.” Clearly, how athletes practice influences how they compete. So having your athletes put forth maximum effort and focus in practice will be a key to their success. But how do you prepare your athletes for the different situations they are likely to face in competition? Throughout training, Coach Sloan simulates competitive situations and thus puts Dan in the position of having to perform under a variety of conditions. Doing so gives Dan the chance to prepare physically and, perhaps more importantly, mentally, for competition.

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The answer is at the end of this article.

Learn to “Get Up” for Competition: Depending on the sport and the individual, the optimal level of mental and physical arousal will vary. Thus, athletes need to identify their optimal state and then learn how to achieve it on a consistent basis. According to Coach Sloan, the answer is to work on the days when you are not physically training, so that Dan could practice and focus in practice will be a key to their success.

Inside This Issue

• Preparing for the Big Competition • Clarity of Focus for Performance Success

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CSP staff members Trent Petrie (middle) and Karen Coffen (sitting on the left) with Dan O’Brien (Rick Sloan, on the left; Team O’Brien, (Rick Sloan, on the left; Dan O’Brien, second from right; and Jim Reardon, on the right)