



Performance Excellence

Volume 6, Issue 1

CENTER FOR SPORT PSYCHOLOGY NEWSLETTER

Fall 2003

The Mentally Tough Athlete

By Christy Greenleaf, Ph.D., & Jon Wildman, B.S.

"What makes the difference and often separates people of equal talent and skill is mental toughness"

Coaches and athletes often attribute competitive successes to mental toughness, but what exactly is that? Mental toughness can be described as a natural or developed mental edge that helps athletes cope better than opponents and be consistent in maintaining determination, focus, confidence and control (Jones et al., 2002). Although coaches often recognize the importance of mental toughness in performance success, they are sometimes uncertain about how to develop and enhance it in their athletes. So how do you develop and enhance mental toughness? In this article, we focus on the four key components of mental toughness: confidence, motivation, focus or distraction control, and arousal management.

The first important aspect of mental toughness is **confidence**, which is the belief in one's ability to succeed and achieve specific goals. Mentally tough athletes believe that they will be successful in accomplishing their goals. Athletes may derive their confidence from past performance successes, physical and mental preparation, encouragement from coaches and peers, positive self-talk, and seeing others who have similar abilities complete the task successfully. Here are a few suggestions to help you develop and enhance your athletes' confidence:

- Re-live past performance success → Have athletes mentally re-experience past successful performances. Ask athletes to recall how they felt both physically and mentally prior to, during and after a competition in which they performed well. The focus should be on the athletes' feelings of success and accomplishment because you want to help athletes strengthen the belief that they can and will be successful.

- Prepare for competition → Ensure that athletes are and feel well-prepared for competition not only physically, but tactically and mentally. For example, tactical preparation might involve systematically reviewing and practicing different strategies or plays that will be used. Mentally preparing in order to build confidence can include visualizing performance success in the upcoming competition.

- Give encouragement → Make sure that your athletes know that you have confidence in them by providing encouragement and support.

Motivation refers to the desire to succeed, to push one's own limits and to come back from setbacks with renewed determination. Dan Gable, World and Olympic gold medal wrestler and one of the most successful wrestling coaches in the United States, has said that, *"Every great athlete has fallen short at some point. Great athletes become great because they refuse to let their setbacks derail them from their determined quest to be the best."* Motivation comes from an internal desire to improve and be successful, as well as from external sources, such as scholarships and recognition.

Goal setting is a great way to enhance motivation and help athletes "bounce back" from disappointments or set-backs. Goal-setting should target both mental and physical aspects of sport and should focus not only on the result of great performances, but also on the process necessary to achieve success. Using the "SMARTTEST" system for goal-setting is one strategy for helping athletes establish and maintain effective goals. A detailed description of the "SMARTTEST" system can be found on our

website at <http://www.sportpsych.unt.edu/newsletters/fall99.pdf>

Being able to **focus and control distractions** is another essential element of mental toughness. Mentally tough athletes are able to regain their focus after unexpected or uncontrollable events and are able to concentrate on the task at hand despite distractions. The use of verbal cues can be an effective way to maintain focus. Verbal cues are words or short phrases that an athlete can say to him or herself before and during performance to appropriately focus attention. A sprinter, for example, may need a quick burst of energy off the starting line and say the word *"Speed"* to herself before the gun fires, whereas a powerlifter who needs to focus his strength before each clean and jerk may shout the word *"Power"* to himself just as the weight is lifted.

Dealing with distractions effectively is another characteristic of a mentally tough athlete. Some distractions need to be dealt with immediately. Distractions during competition should be dealt with promptly in order to refocus one's attention. Self-talk can be used to deal with these types of distractions. For example, an athlete may feel that the referee is not being fair and instead of focusing attention and energy on that, the athlete would tell him or herself that the referee's calls are not something that can be controlled, but that what can be controlled is performance and effort. On the other hand, some distractions, such as worrying about an upcoming test or having problems in a relationship, do not need to be dealt with immediately. Creating an "out box" for distractions that can be dealt with later can help athletes maintain an

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appropriate focus. To make this idea more concrete, athletes can write down their distractions on a notecard prior to a practice or game and then place the notecard in their "out box," which may be their locker or bag.

The final component of mental toughness is **arousal management**. How athletes interpret feelings of arousal, such as having butterflies and feeling jittery, is a key part of mental toughness. Mentally tough athletes recognize that competition anxiety is part of the process and feel confident in their ability to handle it. In fact, mentally tough athletes often thrive on the pressure of competition and challenge. Tiger Woods, well known for his mental toughness, has said, "I always feel pressure. If you don't feel nervous, that means you don't care about how you play." One way to help athletes embrace the pressure of competition is to ask them to re-interpret feelings of anxiety. For example instead of viewing their feelings of anxiety as signs of impending doom (e.g., "I'm going to choke"), ask athletes to think

of those feelings as signs of readiness (e.g., "OK – I'm pumped and I'm ready to go").

Sometimes athletes experience anxiety physically. They may have butterflies in their stomach, feel jittery, have muscle tension, or feel like their heart is racing. Physical relaxation is one way to help athletes calm their bodies and reduce some of the physical feelings of anxiety. Progressive muscle relaxation paired with deep breathing, imagery, and cue words can help train the athlete's mind to recognize sources of tension and then take appropriate measures to relax the body in moments of great stress. Athletes can also become mentally tougher by learning to deal with anxiety through simulated/visualized competitions. Having athletes "see" themselves in the competitive environment, handling all the pressures and performing well helps them feel as if they have "been there before." Thus, on game day, the amount of anxiety they experience will be lessened.

In the quest for improving mental toughness, coaches and athletes should remember what it takes to develop and enhance the performance and execution of *physical skills* in practice and competition. Just like physical skills, developing *mental toughness* requires systematic practice and persistence. So commit practice time to improve confidence, motivation, focus, and anxiety management. If you do, the end result will be well worth it.

References

Jones, G. Hanton, S., & Connaughton, D. (2002). What is this thing called mental toughness? An investigation of elite sport performers. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 14, 205-218.



Effective Coaching Behaviors

By Scott Martin, Ph.D. & Cassie Serpas, M.S.

"The secret to winning is constant, consistent management". – Tom Landry

Winning is the ultimate goal for coaches and athletes. To be an effective leader on the field or court, coaches need to take a look at their coaching behaviors and identify areas in which they can improve. The twelve statements listed to the right give you the opportunity to start this evaluation process. As you read the twelve items think about how you typically respond to your athletes. Once you have considered each statement, indicate whether you typically respond in that way by checking "yes" or "no" next to the item.

Yes	No	As a coach, I...
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	1. Make statements such as "way to go" when athletes perform well.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	2. Do not yell statements of encouragement during practice or competitions.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	3. Make comments such as "shake it off" or "that's all right" after a mistake is made.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	4. Instruct athletes on how to correct mistakes or flaws in their technique or performance.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	5. Voice disappointment regarding athletes' performance following mistakes.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	6. Yell instructions to athletes following mistakes to motivate them to perform up to their potential.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	7. Ignore technical errors that athletes make during a competition.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	8. Have practices organized and running smoothly.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	9. Instruct athletes on needed strategies for an upcoming competition.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	10. Yell things such as "keep hustling" when the team is doing well.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	11. Assign athletes individual responsibilities during practices and competitions.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	12. Talk with athletes about academic problems.

Effective Coaching Behaviors *Continued*

Each item corresponds to one of twelve coaching behaviors that either promotes confidence and athletic success or decreases motivation and limits sport performances (Martin & Barnes, 1999; Smith, Smoll, & Hunt, 1977). What kind of coach are you? As you read through the descriptions of the 12 behaviors, keep in mind how you responded to each item. Remember, learning how you tend to behave is an important first step in evaluating yourself as a coach.

The twelve behaviors can be grouped into two categories: (a) reactive behaviors (items 1 to 8) and (b) spontaneous behaviors (items 9 to 12). A reactive behavior is a response to a specific behavior. There are eight reactive behaviors:

1. *Reinforcement* – A positive, rewarding reaction (verbal or nonverbal) to a good play or high-quality effort such as saying "good job" or "way to go". Athletes respond well to their coaches when they focus on the positive and give clear feedback.

2. *Non-reinforcement* – Failure to respond to a good performance. Failure to give feedback to an athlete can hinder the athlete's future performance and possibly lower their confidence.

3. *Mistake-contingent encouragement* – Encouragement given to an athlete following a mistake. When an athlete makes a mistake during a game/match the coach should give some encouragement like "it's ok, keep up the good work" or "shake it off". Doing so can help the athlete stay focused and confident following an error.

4. *Mistake-contingent technical instruction* – Instruction or demonstration to an athlete on how to correct a mistake he/she has made. When showing an athlete how to correct an error he/she made while performing a maneuver, a coach should be instructional and positive.

5. *Punishment* – A negative reaction

(verbal or nonverbal) following a mistake such as saying "what the ... was that?" Punishment should be kept to a minimum because it can cause problems. First, punishment arouses fear of failure and will usually decrease athletes' performance. Second, punishment may be the only attention the person is receiving and could reinforce the undesirable behavior by drawing attention to it. Third, punishment can establish a hostile and offensive learning environment.

6. *Punitive technical instruction* – Technical instruction following a mistake given in a punitive or hostile manner, such as when you yell at an athlete after they make a mistake and aggressively show them how to do the maneuver correctly. This type of behavior generally does not inspire confidence in the athlete who is being corrected.

7. *Ignoring mistakes* – Failure to respond to an athlete's mistake. Not responding to an athlete's mistake can be just as harmful as punishment. A coach should be consistent with their feedback. Ignoring mistakes by an athlete or the team will only increase unhappiness and failure.

8. *Keeping control* – Reactions intended to restore or maintain order among team members. When keeping control, coaches should do so in a positive manner.

The last four categories are spontaneous behaviors. A spontaneous behavior is initiated by the coach and is not a response to a discernible preceding event.

9. *General technical instruction* – Spontaneous instruction in the techniques and strategies of the sport (not following a mistake). A coach should show different techniques to their athletes before mistakes actually occur. After demonstrating or teaching a maneuver, have the athletes practice it.

10. *General encouragement* – Spontaneous encouragement that does not

follow a mistake. A coach could say something like "keep up the good work" or "go out there and do your best". Such positive comments are important and help make athletes feel good about their efforts.

11. *Organization* – Administrative behavior that sets the stage for play by assigning duties or responsibilities. A coach can assign certain responsibilities to individuals during practices and game/competitions.

12. *General communication* – Interactions with athletes unrelated to the game. A coach can talk with their athletes about school, athletic and personal goals, and different aspects of life. One important aspect is that coaches be there "emotionally" for their players. Communicating that you care about your players beyond the competitive arena is an important part of being a credible coach.

Coaching behavior should be evaluated regularly to make sure that the coach is giving the players the best quality of coaching. Which behaviors stand out when you coach? Research on effective coaching indicates that coaches should primarily use a positive approach that incorporates: (1) *positive reinforcement* such as "nice explosive start off the blocks"; (2) *general technical instruction* such as "to be successful against a half court defense we need to step between the defenders and pass to the player cutting to the top of the key"; and (3) *general encouragement* such as "keep focused on the task and success will come". Athletes have shown increased self-esteem, increased positive attitudes, and they rate their team and sport positively when coaches use positive reinforcement, general technical instruction, and mistake contingent encouragement behaviors. Coaches who use positive behaviors will have lower dropout rates and fewer dissatisfied athletes than coaches who do not use these behaviors.

Effective Coaching Behaviors



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“You can motivate players better with kind words than you can with a whip”. – *Bud Wilkinson*

In addition, coaches should not pick one behavior and run with it. A coach needs to respond in various ways during a practice or competition. Athletes are different and are not likely to respond similarly to the same coaching feedback. Knowing your athletes and individualizing your coaching behaviors and feedback to meet the needs of each athlete should be the number one goal of every coach. Individualizing is not easy, but by

determining the appropriate coaching behaviors for each athlete, you will have the greatest impact on the athlete's performance.

Coaches have considerable influence on their athletes. Using the right behaviors and individualizing their coaching will help athletes develop the necessary skills physically as well as psychologically. If after reading this you have identified behaviors you want to incorporate and behaviors you want to eliminate, now is the time. Don't wait! By starting the new behaviors and eliminating the bad your

coaching performance will increase as will the performance of your athletes.

References

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PS48105-1/04

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