



# Performance Excellence

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CENTER FOR SPORT PSYCHOLOGY NEWSLETTER

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## The Physical & Mental Preparation of the WORLD'S GREATEST ATHLETE

BY TRENT A. PETRIE, PH.D.

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 and 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 no-heighted the pole vault at the Olympic Trials and, as a result, failed to make the team. Clearly, not reaching this goal was devastating. So how did they rebound? To regain focus, 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.

*"The only way to overcome is to hang in, even I'm starting to believe that."*

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.

*(Trivia: 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,

*(continued on back page)*

## 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. All are welcome to attend this free event which will be held on the University of North Texas main campus on Monday, February 21, 2000 from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. For detailed information on the location and the panel participants visit our website in early February. ■



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

## Inside This Issue

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# Preparing **for the Big** Competition Game

By Karen D. Cogan, Ph.D.

It's the day of the big competition. This is your chance to make it to the finals, or win conference or show the talent scout what you can do. No pressure, right? So how do you cope with the pressures to perform in these highly competitive situations?

Most successful athletes have a plan to help them deal with the stress and anxiety that often accompanies big events. Without a plan, athletes are more vulnerable to the negative effects of high pressure. Every athlete needs to develop his or her own 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 experiment with some of 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 mental skills. For example, you might take a few minutes each day to imagine yourself in different scenarios 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 crowd noise, 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 something breaks.)

- **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, nosy

reporters and how you will deal with them.

- **Plan for how you will deal with family and friends who come to 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 staff in place.** Make sure sports medicine personnel 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 it is best to go into a big event 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 coaches, you may also choose to taper your training for optimal performance. But don't change your pre-event 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 will 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, use relaxation strategies to help you 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 what you have to work with (e.g., the pool is cold; the field is bumpy.) Elite level athletes might arrive at a competitive site a week or more before they compete to acclimate themselves. You can use video footage from previous

competitions or speak to others who have competed or played at the same level in the same situation. For example, Troy Airman talked with Roger Staubach prior to Troy's first Superbowl appearance to gain a better perspective on how to prepare and what to expect.

- **Recognize that experiencing some anxiety is normal (for coaches too).** Don't get anxious about being anxious. Some pre-competition nervousness may be an indication that you are "psyched" and ready to perform.

- **Avoid things that will bring you down emotionally the day of the competition.** If at all possible, avoid situations that are likely to make you feel tired, depressed, sad upset, or negative (e.g., upsetting relationships). Focus on staying alert, positive, and energized.

- **Dress to win.** Wear what makes you feel comfortable and ready to perform well. Superstition or not, dress rituals (e.g., wearing your lucky blue socks) can be helpful and important. Just remember that 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 help to 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 are only partially prepared. Preparing for the big competition means being mentally prepared as well. Coaches and athletes alike can benefit 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."

## References:

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# PAY ATTENTION!

By: Scott Martin, Ph.D. and  
Peggy Richardson, Ph.D.

## Clarity of Focus for Performance Success

*"The most important part of a player's body is above the shoulders." -- Ty Cobb*

Athletes and coaches realize the importance of "proper focus" to achieve the best athletic performance possible. The general consensus seems to be that when athletes are properly focused, they are aware of only those things that are critical to performance. What is sometimes less obvious is **WHAT** athletes should focus upon and **HOW** an appropriate focus is achieved. Since people can direct their attention to only a few things at a time, it is imperative that their focus be directed to the information that is most relevant for that moment or situation. This level of focus would seem to be particularly important for athletes who are often called upon to perform in "high stake" situations such as a critical putt for birdie on the 18th hole or a last minute free throw to win conference.

**WHAT** should be the object(s) of an athlete's focus?

It is important to remember that athletes are in control of their focus. Unfortunately, this focus is sometimes directed towards unproductive things such as negative thoughts (e.g., "I am not ready," "Coach doesn't like me"), irrelevant information (e.g., the score, opponents' trash talk, or officials' actions), and energy-sapping emotions (e.g., fear, anxiety, or worry). Usually focusing on these areas can cause a decline in performance. Consider what happens when Sarah, a basketball player, is focused on the score or on spectators waving their arms when it is time to shoot two free throws - she is more likely to miss the shots. If the first shot is missed, Sarah may shift her focus to the thought of not being focused. If Sarah remains focused on the improper thought, then the second shot will more likely be missed as well. If this happens, her focus may then be shifted to worry about the prospect of going to the free throw line again later in the game. While this is all happening, the game continues to go on and Sarah, who is still worrying, lets the person she is guarding slip by for an uncontested lay-up. This mistake may reinforce the negative thought pattern of improper focus and may perhaps lead to another emotion ...fear (e.g., "Coach is going to bench me"). It should be noted that, throughout the preceding

example, the athlete is focused. Unfortunately, the focus is neither relevant nor productive. Much like life, a sporting event has a time line of its own and the key is to stay focused only on the things that contribute to success in the present moment. An important feature of mental training is simplification of the thought process. For many sport situations there is usually a "routine" or "mental key" that leads to or unlocks correct performance.

**HOW** is an Appropriate Focus Achieved?

One way to quickly recover focus is to develop performance "routines" that identify "key" elements such as 1) a symbol, 2) a focal point, and 3) 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.

A focal point can be any visible target that is important for the execution of a sport skill. For instance, the pitcher may target the catcher's glove or a basketball player may locate the center eyelet of the basketball rim. However, looking at the focal point or target for an extended period of time could give it away (e.g., a pitch in baseball) or cause aiming (e.g., being excessively concerned with an external target such as the hole when putting a golf ball). Therefore, athletes may want to practice shifting their visual focus while maintaining a mental image of the relevant information to perform successfully.

Cue words represent the way an athlete would like to be seen or how the athlete would like to feel while performing and can be used to initiate or trigger the correct movement response. A basketball player wants the shot to go "just over" the eyelet while a diver focuses on a spot in the water and uses the cue word "rip" to emphasize the "ripped" entry into the water. The reminder "just over" or "rip" triggers the correct movement.

Symbols, targets, and cue words can serve as simple reminders of the things athletes need to focus on in the immediate moment, as well as a reminder that they have done everything they

need to do to get ready to perform successfully. The beauty of a performance routine that utilizes symbols, targets, and cue words in this manner is that the athlete can personally pick out what works best for them to maximize performance success. Obviously, key elements must be identified and practiced beforehand, but this can easily be done with the assistance of the coach, aided perhaps by the input of a sport psychology consultant. Focusing is a skill and, like any skill, it can be improved with practice.

Remember to **Focus** on the **3 P's of Success**:

**Prepared Focus.** Athletes who experience success often indicate that they have practiced the skill numerous times mentally and physically before actually performing in competition. One way athletes learn to develop greater concentration, confidence, and composure is to practice mental performance routines that include symbols, targets, and cue words which allow them to "just do it." In other words, their performance becomes more automatic and more consistent.

**Positive Focus.** In pressure situations, the best athletes have replaced negative thoughts of failing with positive ones. They expect to succeed because they know they are prepared to compete and are ready 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.

**Present Focus.** 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. The only moment that counts and the only moment they know they have control over is the present one. Therefore, when they are placed in pressure situations, the best athletes don't feel threatened because they are prepared for whatever comes their way.

Coaches and athletes should focus on what can be done to be successful versus what was previously done incorrectly. Developing and practicing routines while being positive and staying in the present moment can help provide clarity of focus for performance success. ■

# *The Physical & Mental Preparation of the* **WORLD'S GREATEST ATHLETE**

*(continued from front page)*

successful athletes need to learn how to get up for each event, but be able to calm themselves down in between competitions or at key moments during matches/games. If they don't, they will likely burn themselves out before the competition is through. Whether "getting up" for competition involves visualizing a successful performance, listening to motivating music, thinking about important cue words (such as "strong," or "ready") or relaxing and breathing calmly, by learning and applying the necessary mental strategies, athletes can put themselves in the position to perform at their best.

**Physical Preparation:** Is there ever too much? Yes! Coaches and athletes can train too much and thus limit performances. More training is not always better though that belief runs deep for many. Instead of focusing just on quantity, consider the quality of the workouts as well. Interspersing shorter, high intensity workouts in a training regimen can provide some variety and taking a day off can provide time for athletes to rest and recover. In addition, devote

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 workout 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.

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 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 practices and training 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:  
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