Sharpening Mental Skills

Stephanie J. Hanrahan and Daniel F. Gucciardi

The best athletes are not only physically fit and technically sound, but also extremely mentally strong. In 2010 Justin Langer (former Australian international cricketer) echoed this line of reasoning: ‘Being successful as an international cricketer transcends the ability to play an elegant cover drive, brutal pull shot or belligerent forward defence. The best players are not only physically fit and technically sound, they are also extremely mentally strong.’

Being confident in challenging and adverse situations is a hallmark of mentally tough athletes in all sports. Think of tennis players such as Federer, Nadal or Djokovic in the oppressive heat during a five-set match. They excel at maintaining their focus, effort and resolve despite the adverse conditions. Mentally tough athletes effectively manage their attention, persevere through difficult times, desire success, expect positive outcomes, effectively manage their emotions and understand their sport context (Gucciardi & Gordon, 2011). It is this constellation of key personal resources that enables mentally tough athletes to effectively negotiate the ups and downs of everyday life as well as acute (e.g., being dropped from a team) and chronic (e.g., long-term injury) stressors and adversities.

A useful exercise for athletes (and coaches) is to consider a list of factors that sometimes affect performance and then indicate those they believe can lead to inconsistent performances (see figure 13.1). They can then gather in small groups to discuss the factors they chose. Such discussions encourage reflection, let people know they are not alone in their concerns, help coaches determine which issues or skills might be useful to present in group workshops and result in participants recognising the importance of mental factors.

Mental skills training attempts to bolster the psychological skill arsenal of athletes, resulting in competitors who are better equipped to perform to their potential. This chapter details the components of that competitive mindset and suggests techniques to help athletes achieve it.

SELF-AWARENESS

What motivates you? What are your strengths? How often do you use your strengths? How do you typically respond to critical incidents or challenges (e.g., returning from injury)? The answers to these important questions help athletes become the object of their own attention or focus, and to identify, process and store information about themselves.

Acquiring such information through honest and accurate self-reflections is a fundamental building block for the development and application of mental skills. Armed with the knowledge of these issues, athletes can adjust or regulate their behaviour or other important processes to meet personally meaningful standards of performance. For example, conscious awareness of how they have successfully bounced back from competitive setbacks (e.g., losing to an opponent) can help athletes identify and practise strategies or processes that they can use to deal with other challenges in the future.
Figure 13.1 Factors Affecting Performance

Instructions: For each of the situations in the following list, place a tick mark if you believe it is something that sometimes contributes to inconsistent performance.

- Thinking about work, relationships or study
- Being distracted by someone in the stands
- Worrying about losing (thinking about the outcome)
- Doubting your own abilities
- Worrying about the performances of others
- Struggling with decisions
- Having problems with a new technique or strategy early on in a competition
- Having no plan
- Being too anxious
- Feeling too much pressure from others
- Being overconfident
- Thinking the competition is a lost cause while it is still going on
- Thinking about the next round of competition (while still involved in the current round)
- Worrying about what others might think
- Thinking about what someone said or did to you before the competition
- Skipping the normal precompetition routine
- Wishing you were somewhere else
- Feeling burned out
- Having unrealistic expectations
- Dwelling on mistakes
- Having doubts about equipment or physical preparation
- Falling in (or out of) love
- Trying too hard
- Being unable to concentrate or focus
- Worrying about an injury or illness
- Being self-conscious performing in front of others
- Disagreeing with officials or administrators
- Losing your temper
- Thinking about what you do not want to do
- Being distracted
- Thinking about the venue, weather or conditions
- Having no reason for being there
- Realising the competition is running late (or early)
- Doing unexpectedly well
- Doing unexpectedly poorly
- Thinking about what will happen after the competition is over
- Swearing at yourself
- Having ongoing arguments with others
- ____________________________ (add your own)

MOTIVATION SOURCES

Motivation is one of the most central issues for individuals and organisations involved in mobilising others to act. Motivation is a term frequently mentioned in sport, but what is it? Motivation is the desire, or inner fire, that compels one to act and persist. To understand motivational orientations, coaches should consider three important components:

- Direction—whether a person prefers to seek out, approach or avoid certain situations or behaviours.
- Intensity—the amount of effort or energy one applies in a particular situation or to a particular behaviour.
- Persistence—the temporal stability of motivation. For example, two gymnasts like to seek out new information when learning a new apparatus, but Sarah takes a more casual, long-term approach than Jessica, who invests a significant amount of effort in a short period of time.

Excluding instances of amotivation (i.e., having no motivation), the reasons people engage in activities or behaviours can be classified according to five levels of self-determination. Coaches and athletes can use figure 13.2 to help determine what motivates them. It is common to agree with more than one statement because people can be motivated by more than one reason for a given activity or behaviour.

Figure 13.3 details how the questions relate to the motivation continuum. Those who strongly agree with the first statement are intrinsically motivated and driven by the pleasure and satisfaction derived from engaging in an activity or behaviour. Those who strongly agree with statement 5 are externally regulated and primarily driven by the desire to obtain external rewards or recognition from others. Located between these two ends of the motivational continuum are three other forms of extrinsic motivation ranging from being autonomous to being more controlled (i.e., progressing from statements 2 to 4).

Those who strongly agree with statement 2 typically view the activity or behaviour not only as important but also as congruent with their deeply held values and sense of self. This form of motivation is referred to as integrated regulation. Statement 3 refers to identified regulation. Those who strongly agree with this statement typically value and judge the outcomes of the activity or behaviour as being personally important. Finally, those who agree with statement 4 have partially internalised their desire for external rewards such that they typically engage in an activity or behaviour to avoid negative feelings (e.g., guilt, shame) or to enhance their egos and feelings of self-worth. This form of motivation is termed introjected regulation.

Autonomous forms of motivation (i.e., intrinsic, integrated and identified regulations) have primarily been associated with

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Figure 13.2 Sources of Motivation

Consider the extent to which each of the following statements describes why you are currently practising your sport as an athlete or coach. Using a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), choose the level at which you agree or disagree with each statement.

1. I engage in an activity or behaviour for enjoyment, learning or task accomplishment reasons.  
2. I engage in an activity or behaviour because it reflects a valued aspect of my life or my core beliefs.  
3. I engage in an activity or behaviour because I value its outcome(s).  
4. I engage in an activity or behaviour to reduce uncomfortable feelings such as guilt, anxiety, external pressures or inadequacy.  
5. I engage in an activity or behaviour to receive rewards or recognition or to demonstrate competence to others.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amotivation</th>
<th>Controlled extrinsic motivation</th>
<th>Autonomous extrinsic motivation</th>
<th>Intrinsic motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>External regulation</td>
<td>Introjected regulation</td>
<td>Identified regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Integrated regulation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What regulates the motivation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Intentional</th>
<th>Compliance</th>
<th>Self-control</th>
<th>Personal importance</th>
<th>Congruence</th>
<th>Interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-valuing</td>
<td>External rewards and punishment</td>
<td>Ego involvement</td>
<td>Conscious valuing</td>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Enjoyment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incompetence</td>
<td></td>
<td>Internal rewards and punishment</td>
<td>Synthesis with self</td>
<td></td>
<td>Inherent satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 13.3** Self-determination continuum of motivation.


More favourable outcomes (e.g., better performance, better concentration, positive affect, persistence) than controlled motivational types have (i.e., external and introjected regulations). Coaches can help athletes focus less on external reinforcements (e.g., receiving prize money, having to do extra physical training as punishment) or engaging in or avoiding certain types of behaviours or activities and focus more on personally referenced desires (e.g., values, beliefs).

When presenting athletes with activities or behaviours that may not be inherently enjoyable, coaches can increase their motivation by providing rationales in a non-controlling way, while also acknowledging their feelings and providing some form of choice. For example, a football coach may say something like the following:

*Today we're going to focus on video analysis because our opponents this weekend have been particularly effective at the counterattack, and we need to identify how we can reduce their effectiveness in such circumstances. I appreciate that this exercise may not be very enjoyable or challenging, so I'll let you decide when you want to stop for a break to mix things up.*

The coach provides a rationale by stating that they are working to reduce the opponent's effectiveness on the counterattack. The coach then acknowledges the players' feelings by addressing the challenging nature of the exercise. Finally, the coach gives the players a choice of when to take a break.

Understanding what motivates athletes across a variety of situations (e.g., learning a new skill, injury rehabilitation) and contexts (e.g., in training and competition, or as a student or employee outside of sport) provides an important foundation on which coaches can set and adjust both short- and long-term goals that are personally meaningful. (Goal setting is discussed later in this chapter.)

**STRENGTHS ASSESSMENT**

What qualities do athletes possess that allow them to perform well or at their personal best? These characteristics can be considered personal strengths because they enable them to behave, think and feel in ways that facilitate optimal functioning and performance. An important distinction to be made here is between possessing and using strengths. For example, Rachel is highly curious but rarely makes use of this strength, whereas Erika consistently uses this attribute in a variety of situations including her sporting life (e.g., she regularly seeks advice from her teammates) and personal life (e.g., making new friends) to achieve her goals.

Coaches can work with athletes to identify and label personal strengths, as well as to explore how they currently use their strengths and how they might use them to address existing problems or facilitate positive functioning. It is important to note, however, that coaches...
and athletes should not ignore athletes’ weaknesses; rather, they must identify, enable and develop strengths as well as work on managing the occurrence or the effects of weaknesses.

**Identifying Strengths** Coaches have a number of strategies available for exploring their own strengths and those of their athletes. Gordon and Gucciardi (2011) detailed an example of their strengths-based approach in the development of mental toughness in cricket. Their approach is built on the Realise 2 model by Capp (www.cappeu.com). Specifically, this model focuses on the following aspects:

- Maximising unrealised strengths—characterised by high energy and high performance, but low use
- Marshalling realised strengths—characterised by high energy, high performance and high use
- Moderating learned behaviours—characterised by lower energy but high performance and variable use
- Minimising weaknesses—characterised by lower energy, lower performance and variable use

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Prior to a practice session, the authors collaborated with coaches to assist players in identifying their strengths as batters, bowlers or fielders by having them answer the questions or complete the statements that follow.* Subsequent discussions focused on the implications of the players’ responses for their self-regulated performance enhancement and training priorities.

- My strengths are . . .
- I feel strong when I am [doing this] . . .
- My best [shot, delivery, position] is . . .
- I get most of my [runs, wickets] by . . .
- I deliver my best and feel in my element when [doing these activities] . . .
- My favourite role(s) that I find most stimulating is/are . . .

- Things that I can do to build my batting/bowling/fielding strengths, or put myself into situations where I am in my element, are . . .


A spin bowler commented that his strength is ‘adapting my bowling style to the plan we [bowling pair] have set [for the batters] . . ., which could be tying down one end with tight bowling, or throwing up a couple of juicy ones to entice the batter into a poor shot’. He subsequently identified ‘trying out different scenarios during training and developing strategies that can help me execute these plans effectively’ as an avenue to help build his bowling strength. (Grordan and Gucciardi, 2010)

Other conversational techniques can be used in the strengths discovery process. What do strengths sound and look like? Coaches can ask their athletes to spend a couple of minutes talking about something they have recently been struggling with or about one of their weaknesses. Athletes can then spend a similar amount of time discussing one of their signature strengths, something they have recently done well, or do well when they are at their best.

While listening to athletes discussing their weaknesses and strengths, coaches should take notice of their tone, body language and other cues. More often than not, people are more energetic, engaged or relaxed, and the conversation flows more freely, when they are talking about their strengths when compared with their weaknesses. Cues to look for include rising inflection, rapid speech, better posture, wide eyes, raised eyebrows, smiling and laughing, increased hand gestures, increased use of metaphors and more fluent speech.

Identifying strengths can be a highly engaging activity for coaches and athletes. Although coaches can listen and look for instances of athletes’ strengths in their conversations and their behaviours, these techniques are limited by their reliance on the strength being identified when it happens to come into play. Thus,
it is also beneficial to work with athletes to look for strengths in themselves. Performance profiling (discussed later in this chapter) can be a useful and simple technique for coaches to implement with athletes. Additionally, the following questions can be used as a helpful framework or foundation on which to create dialogue around strengths:

- What are you good at? What do you enjoy doing?
- Tell me about the greatest experience you have had when you have been at your best. What enabled that to happen? How could you use this strength more? Where do you see opportunities to use this strength? How might you know when you should use this strength more and when you should use it less?
- What effect does using your strength have on others, and how does that feedback suggest you might better use your strength?
- What are some of the things from your past that you are most proud of? What energises you in the present? What are you looking forward to in the future?

The ability to identify one’s strengths does not come naturally to all for various reasons (e.g., being self-critical, lacking introspection). Athletes who have difficulty naming their strengths can be encouraged to spot strengths in others by observing them, listening to them discuss their strengths and inquiring about the strengths of others. This process can help them develop an appreciation for this orientation, which provides a foundation for the identification of their own strengths.

Coaches can simply reword the preceding questions using another person, such as a teammate, as the subject (e.g., What is John good at? What does John enjoy doing?). Additionally, soliciting feedback from others, important in athletes’ social networks (e.g., teammates, coaches, parents), often raises their awareness of their personal strengths.

**Using Strengths** Knowing their personal strengths is important, but if athletes never make use of them, they will be less likely to reach their full potential. Thus, having assisted athletes to identify their strengths, coaches can next work with them to explore how they might use these strengths to address existing problems or improve their performances. A formalised ‘use of strengths’ questionnaire has been developed (see Govindji & Linley, 2007). However, coaches who prefer to adopt more informal methods can simply integrate the following questions into their conversations with athletes:

- How often do you play to your strengths? How often have you played to your strengths this week?
- How easy is it for you to use your strengths in lots of different ways?
- Does using your strengths every day come naturally to you?
- How easy is it for you to use your strengths in lots of different situations?

Another useful starting point is to encourage athletes to consciously reflect on situations in which they used their strengths successfully and unsuccessfully. For example, although persistence can be extremely useful in one circumstance (e.g., learning a new skill), it can be detrimental in other situations (e.g., playing while injured). Identifying patterns in situations in which they were successful can help athletes understand when their strengths can be best used. An additional helpful exercise is to have athletes describe their top five signature strengths and then identify how they can make use of each strength in a new way every week or month.

**SELF-CONFIDENCE**

Some people think that self-confidence is the luck of the draw—great if you have it, bad luck if you don’t. But self-confidence is a skill that can be developed. Confidence and anxiety tend to have an inverse relationship. In other words, it is rare to be confident and anxious at the same time. The goal is not to create egotistical monsters who think they are so good they don’t need to train (overconfidence or false confidence), but instead to help athletes have a general faith in their abilities to perform. When self-doubt creeps in, the resultant decline in
performance can instigate a downward spiral of decreasing performance and confidence.

Table 13.1 provides a number of confidence-boosting techniques that can, when combined with confirming performance, give athletes a greater sense of control. Indeed, a key concept in any mental skills training program is controlling the controllable. Too many athletes and coaches waste time and energy stressing out about things they cannot control. They are much better off putting their energy into things they can control. Also, reminding themselves about factors they can control helps athletes feel in control and therefore confident. Additionally, athletes can gain or sustain confidence by using the techniques for self-awareness, self-monitoring, self-regulation and self-preparation discussed in this chapter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Explanation or example</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on performance improvements.</td>
<td>When reflecting on past performances, be sure to remember positives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work on fitness and strength.</td>
<td>Feeling physically strong builds confidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set short-term, challenging and realistic goals.</td>
<td>Achievement of goals leads to confidence in self, coach and training methods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbally persuade each other.</td>
<td>Sincerity is a must.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage positive self-talk (repeat affirmations).</td>
<td>Recording affirmations and playing them back is a useful exercise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss realistic expectations.</td>
<td>Avoid setting yourself up for failure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look at mistakes positively (reduces fear of failure).</td>
<td>If you never make mistakes, chances are you are not pushing yourself to try anything new.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realise that confidence comes from hard work and practice.</td>
<td>Don’t sit back and wait for confidence to find you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try to get informational as well as evaluative feedback.</td>
<td>You need information to know how to recreate positives or improve negatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review videos of prior good performances.</td>
<td>Seeing is believing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use others as role models.</td>
<td>Others can model not only technique and strategy, but also confidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act ‘as if’.</td>
<td>Fake it ‘til you make it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act as if you are an animal or a machine (these never lack confidence).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use imagery.</td>
<td>Rehearse previous achievements or image reaching goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on reaching optimal arousal.</td>
<td>Arousal and activation are related to confidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce anxiety through relaxation.</td>
<td>Anxiety and confidence rarely exist at the same time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce fear of anxiety by viewing it as a sign of readiness.</td>
<td>Replace ‘OMG. I’m anxious!’ with ‘The adrenaline is pumping; I’m ready.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognise that failure results from lack of effort or experience, or poor strategy.</td>
<td>Attribute failure to causes that are controllable (i.e., future success is possible).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on internal and stable reasons for success.</td>
<td>Internal attributions for success underscore that the successes can be repeated.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SELF-MONITORING

Self-monitoring, which involves indentifying a specific aspect of behaviour or performance and recording the number of times it has occurred and the quality of these occurrences, is a relatively simple and versatile technique for increasing desirable and decreasing undesirable thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Many coaches and athletes may already engage in a fair amount of self-monitoring, but the focus is typically on physical, technical and tactical skills.

There are two components to self-monitoring. First is an observation component that involves ascertaining whether a given behaviour or process occurred. This component requires clarity as to the nature of the behaviour or process. Second is a recording component, which requires an assessment of whether the person engaged in or performed the desired behaviour or process in the intended manner. Self-monitoring tools and techniques can be used as a baseline against which future assessments can be compared to examine the degree of change accomplished in working towards increasing desirable and decreasing undesirable thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

PERFORMANCE PROFILING

Performance profiling is a useful technique for helping athletes raise their awareness of the important qualities (physical, technical, tactical and mental) required to perform at the highest level in their sports. This approach is considered a self-monitoring tool because it also provides an individualised profile that can be referred back to and amended when working towards increasing desirable and decreasing undesirable thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Unlike traditional approaches in which the coach (or sport psychologist) imposes important qualities on athletes with little or no consultation, the performance profile is an athlete-centred assessment procedure that gives athletes an active role in determining the psychological skills or qualities that are important for performance in their sports. The performance profile technique follows three simple steps.

First, the coach introduces performance profiling by explaining to athletes how it will help them identify the attributes required to perform successfully in their sports. At this point the focus is on the athletes’ self-perceived needs and strengths; there are no right or wrong answers. Coaches can outline some of the benefits of using the technique (e.g., enhanced self-awareness, intrinsic motivation and self-confidence, and the fact that it is an individualised monitoring tool) to encourage buy-in from athletes who are resistant to the process. Second, the coach helps athletes determine which attributes or characteristics are necessary for performing to their potential.

Finally, the athlete provides a self-assessment of the qualities obtained in the preceding step. Typically, athletes provide an assessment of their ‘current self’ (i.e., how they currently view themselves on each of the qualities or characteristics), as well as any number of alternative ratings (e.g., ratings from coaches or teammates, best-ever performance, ideal self). Figure 13.4 depicts an example of the outcome of this process from an elite swimmer. Although we have provided an example of the mental qualities required for successful performance, coaches can adapt this process to generate athletes’ perspectives on the important technical, tactical, or physical qualities in their sports.

GOAL SETTING

Once they have completed performance profiles, athletes can select the two or three performance factors they would like to focus on and improve. The motivation to work on these factors can be increased or maintained through the use of goal setting. Goals are useful because they give direction, focus attention and effort and help foster new strategies, thereby enhancing persistence.

The goal-setting process also helps athletes see improvement. Athletes often compare their current performances to the performances they had yesterday or last week. Particularly at the elite end of the spectrum, notable
**Figure 13.4  Elite Swimmer's Profile of Requisite Mental Skills**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-belief</td>
<td>Confidence in ability</td>
<td>7. Focus</td>
<td>Attention and concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Motivation</td>
<td>Desire to swim</td>
<td>8. Making sacrifices</td>
<td>Decisiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Handling pressure</td>
<td>Overcomes adversity</td>
<td>10. Work ethic</td>
<td>Trains harder and smarter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Positivity</td>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td>11. Goal-oriented</td>
<td>Guided by goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Perspective</td>
<td>Faces adversity with optimism</td>
<td>12. Commitment</td>
<td>Dedication to swimming</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
improvements in performance are rarely made in a short time frame. A goal that is achieved, however, is obvious evidence of improvement. Not only does achieving a goal have a positive effect on motivation, but it also enhances confidence—in both the athlete’s ability and the training process.

Many coaches have heard of the principle of SMART goals. To be effective, goals should be specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic and time based. Table 13.2 provides questions that can be used to check whether goals meet these criteria. Three Ps (positive, personal and process) can be added to the acronym to make it SMART PPP.

In addition to the SMART criteria, goals should be positive. There is no point in focusing on what one does not want to do. For example, the only way to achieve the goal of not thinking about pink elephants is to have the positive goal of thinking about something else, such as pink cats or green elephants. Goals should also be personal (the second P). Athletes need to set their own goals. Although it may be quicker for coaches to set goals for their athletes rather than helping the athletes set their own goals, people are more invested when they set their own goals. People need to feel autonomous, that they have some say in what they are doing.

The final P is for process. Goals should focus on the process of improving technique, strategy, or particular behaviours. Almost all athletes and coaches want to win, but the focus, and therefore the goal, needs to be on what they are going to do to increase their chances of winning. A swimmer cannot control the outcome of a race. If Pedro is in lane 4, he can only control what happens in lane 4—that is, his own technique, strategy and behaviour. He cannot control what happens in the other lanes. If Pedro sets the goal of winning, he has no control over achieving it. It may be that the world champion is in town and competing in the same race. Outcome goals tend to lead to people giving up when they think they have no chance of winning or easing off when they think they have a competition won. It all goes back to the idea of controlling the controllable.

If winning is off limits as a goal, what are areas in which goals can be set? Goals can relate to fitness (agility, flexibility, endurance, power, strength), technique, tactics, mental skills (self-talk, imagery, anxiety control, precompetition routines), team issues (communication, trust, fulfilling specific roles), health (nutrition, hydration, sleep, injury rehab), or areas outside of sport (study, relationships, work).

The first step in the goal-setting process involves some self-reflection (e.g., Where am I now? Where do I want to be with my sport in two months, six months, two years?). Athletes should also reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. Goals often involve strengthening an area in which one is weak, but they can also focus on taking greater advantage of a strength.

The next step is selecting a specific area on which to focus, setting a long-term goal (usually six months to two years away), and then thinking of the first couple of short-term goals (to be achieved in one to two weeks) on a goal-setting staircase (i.e., the first step or two towards achieving the long-term goal). Athletes need

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Question to determine whether the principle has been met</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Is the precise goal obvious?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measurable</td>
<td>Is there an exact method of determining whether the goal has been achieved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action oriented</td>
<td>Will reaching the goal require effort?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistic</td>
<td>Is the goal achievable?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time based</td>
<td>Is there a specific date by which the goal will be achieved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Does the goal stipulate the desired behaviour?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Does the goal relate to performance, technique or behaviour (rather than outcome)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Has the goal been established by the person involved (and not imposed by someone else)?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to make sure that their first short-term goals are SMART PPP.

The third step (which is often skipped) is to brainstorm for strategies that could be used to achieve the goal. This stage is the one in which coaches can and should be most involved. Athletes should then select one or two of the strategies and specifically determine when they are going to do what, where, with whom and for how long.

The goal-setting process does not end here. Some coaches tend to tick goal setting off a list of things to do once goals have been set, but goals need to be regularly monitored and revisited. When athletes reach their goals, they (and their coaches) should enjoy the sense of achievement and then set the next goal. If they do not achieve a goal, they need to consider whether a different strategy is needed, the short-term goal was too challenging and needs to be modified, or laziness was the main culprit.

If the main issue appears to be lack of effort, then athletes could consider creating a contract. For those with good self-control, the contract can be with themselves and a reward (e.g., getting a massage, buying some new music) can be tied to achieving the goal. Athletes who are not particularly good at delayed gratification can set up a contract with someone else.

For example, athletes who know they should be doing strength and conditioning training in their own time but never seem to schedule it could give a trusted person $200. Any weeks in which the athlete completes a specified number of sessions, the athlete gets $20 back. But, any week in which the desired number of sessions is not completed, the $20 for that week gets sent as a donation to a rival club. The thought of their hard-earned money going to the opposition may motivate them to work towards their goals!

**SELF-REGULATION**

With an increased awareness of and appreciation for the important components of successful performance and development, combined with an understanding of processes to monitor progress, coaches can teach athletes strategies or techniques for attaining personal goals. This section focuses on techniques that can be used before, during, or after training or competition.

Coaches should encourage athletes to regularly return to the strategies and processes detailed in the previous sections of this chapter. For example, strength awareness discussions and goal setting can be used to help athletes before they engage in self-regulatory strategies, and the performance profile can provide a foundation from which to reflect on behavioural processes and outcomes after executing skills or performing.

**ACTIVATION CONTROL**

Athletes need to learn to control their levels of activation, or arousal. If they are underactivated (e.g., feeling lethargic) or overactivated, their performances will be less than optimal. The key is for athletes to determine their own ideal levels of activation. The optimal level of activation will depend on the sport or activity. Most people require a lower level of activation to putt well in golf than to successfully bench press. Even within the same sport, however, individual differences occur. Some athletes need to be calm, cool and collected when competing (i.e., have a relatively low level of activation), whereas others need to be pumped up and highly activated.

After athletes determine their zone of optimal functioning, they need to learn to regulate their level of activation so they are in that zone every time they perform. If activation levels are too low (more common at training than competition), they can increase them by listening to rowdy music, making noise, engaging in exercise, reminding themselves of their goals, or imaging scenes that energise them (e.g., picturing their rivals training hard). If activation levels are too high, athletes can lower them by listening to calming music, imaging peaceful scenes, or engaging in abdominal breathing (see figure 13.5).

The method of progressive muscle relaxation is more involved than others, but its benefits can be significant to athletes who 'play tight'. Releasing tension in the musculature allows effective, natural movement and eases the mind as the athlete gains a greater sense of control. The basic progressive muscle relaxation procedure presented in figure 13.6 is effective for many but can be tailored to address an athlete's individual needs.
**Figure 13.5 Abdominal Breathing Procedure**

1. Find a quiet and comfortable environment.
2. Lie down on your back and place a pillow under your knees, or place your feet on a chair if you have back problems.
3. Place your left hand on your abdomen just below your belly button and your right hand on your chest.
4. Breathe slowly and deeply so that your abdomen and left hand rise as you inhale and fall as you exhale.
5. Check that you are breathing deeply. Only your left hand should be moving, not your right.
6. Try to spend the same amount of time inhaling as you do exhaling.
7. Try to make the transition between inhaling and exhaling as natural as possible as if your breathing has a mind of its own.

**Figure 13.6 Progressive Muscle Relaxation Procedure**

1. Lie on your back with your arms at your sides and your legs out straight (uncrossed).
2. Close your eyes and focus on your breathing—abdomen up as you breathe in and abdomen down as you breathe out.
3. Now bring your attention to your hands. By spreading your fingers as wide as you can, gradually increase the tension in your hands. Hold for about seven seconds.
4. Stop and relax. Notice the difference between the feelings of tension and relaxation.
5. Use the same process of gradually increasing tension, holding the tension, releasing the tension and then reflecting on the feeling of relaxation for each of the following body parts in turn:
   1. Arms
   2. Feet
   3. Calves
   4. Quads/thighs
   5. Glutes/bum
   6. Abdominals
   7. Pecs/chest
   8. Upper back (squeezing shoulder blades together)
   9. Tongue and jaw (push your tongue up against the roof of your mouth)
   10. Face (scrunch up your eyes, nose and mouth)

Now scan your body for any signs of tension. If you are completely relaxed, enjoy that feeling of relaxation. If, however, you find a part of your body that still feels tense, increase the tension in that body part, hold it and then stop and relax.
Relaxation techniques must be practised to be effective, just as with any sport skill. After mastering the techniques in a fairly calm state, athletes must test them in stressful situations that elicit activation levels that closely approximate their preperformance anxiety.

**ATTENTION AND CONCENTRATION**

For athletes to perform well, they need to pay attention to what is important and ignore what is not. One way of considering attention is along two dimensions: width (broad or narrow) and direction (internal or external). This results in four general types of attention:

- **Broad/external attention** is used to assess a situation by considering multiple variables, such as positioning of teammates or opponents, wind direction and obstacles.
- **Broad/internal attention** is used to analyse and plan and is useful when strategising.
- **Narrow/internal attention** can be used to mentally rehearse a skill or control emotions (e.g., taking a breath to relax).
- **Narrow/external attention** is used to focus on one or two external cues (e.g., the ball).

In most sports, athletes need to be able to switch between various types of attention. Coaches can help athletes consider when they need each of the four types of attention as well as when each may be detrimental. This approach is far more effective than yelling at athletes to pay attention. The latter rarely proves helpful, and it does not answer the question, Pay attention to what?

Coaches can design activities to help athletes block out distractions. A generic activity is to have athletes try to maintain their balance while teammates do everything in their power (except touch them) to get them to lose it. A more sport-specific activity is to try to distract athletes while they are performing a skill. Coaches should keep in mind that being loud and obnoxious is not always the most effective distraction. Consider pistol shooters, who tend to be good at blocking out the boisterous behaviours of others during training. However, when the distraction is limited to whispers, the shooters tend to be more distracted because they are straining to hear, particularly if they are the topic of the whispered conversation.

Drills can also help athletes broaden their focus of attention. For example, two people standing shoulder to shoulder and moving only their outside arms act as a mirror for a third person, who needs to reflect the arm movements of the pair. This mirror activity can be challenging if the third person uses only peripheral vision (i.e., does not flick the eyes during a serve, an experienced tennis player’s attention can include assessing the wind and where the opponent is (broad/external), analysing where to serve (broad/internal), rehearsing the serve mentally (narrow/internal), and focusing on the ball (narrow/external).
back and forth). Difficulty can be increased by adding space between the pair.

A sport-specific example is a volleyball drill designed to make the setter more aware of what is happening on the other side of the net. After a ball is passed to the setter, but before the setter touches the ball, the setter needs to look to the other side of the net and call out the colour of a card the coach is holding. Later, the drill can be modified to have a blocker on the other side of the net shift slightly to the right or left just before the setter touches the ball; the setter needs to set the ball in the opposite direction to the movement of the blocker.

Another aspect of attention is whether athletes are in the past, present, or future. If athletes are not concerned about technique (e.g., swimming or running just to burn calories), then it does not matter too much whether they are thinking about the past, present, or future. If they are competing or training to develop skills, however, they need to be focused on the present. When athletes find that they are thinking about the past (e.g., an argument earlier in the day) or the future (e.g., what to have for dinner after training), they can use a four-step process to refocus on the present:

1. Recognise unwanted thoughts.
2. Use a signal to stop those thoughts (e.g., imaging a stop sign or screaming ‘Stop’ silently).
3. Inhale (from the abdomen).
4. Repeat a cue word or phrase when exhaling (e.g., What’s my next job? Focus. Be present).

For thought stopping to be helpful in stressful situations, athletes need to practise it. To increase athletes’ awareness of thoughts, coaches can yell ‘Past, present, or future?’ once or twice during each training session, at which time the athletes need to consider where their thoughts are. If they are in the present—great! If they are in the past or future, they need to refocus on the present.

**IMAGERY**

Imagery is a skill that involves the ability of a person to mentally recreate objects, persons, skills, movements, and situations when they are not present. Basically, the human brain can’t tell the difference between perceptual and real stimuli. The more vivid the image (i.e., the more senses involved), the more the brain is going to think the image is reality. Imagery provides a mental and physical blueprint of the performance by developing muscle memory through neural firings.

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that people who combine physical practice with mental practice (i.e., imagery) learn skills faster and perform better than those who practise only physically or mentally. Imagery can also be used to control emotions, develop awareness and confidence, improve concentration and aid with healing and pain control.

Imagery is advantageous because it is not physically fatiguing, avoids the risk of injury or reinjury, can be used anywhere and anytime, uses a language understood by the body, accelerates the learning process and allows for slow-motion skill analysis or correction. Images need to be vivid and controlled to be effective. If imagery skills have not been developed, however, asking athletes to image may be counterproductive.

For example, there was a basketball player who could make free throws at training, but tended to choke when it came to competition. He decided to image himself making free throws in competition. Good in theory, but disastrous in practice. He had no control of his images. In his image, every time he went to dribble the ball before shooting, the ball would stick to the ground and he never got to shoot—making him even more anxious!

Imagery scripts that guide athletes through specific sporting skills can help both the vividness and control of images. Athletes should be relaxed but alert when imaging and also realistic and patient with the imagery. If a sprinter currently takes 14 seconds to run 100 metres, she cannot just press the fast forward button on her imagery and run the same distance in 8 seconds.

The analogy to video, however, can be useful. When athletes have a breakthrough with technique, coaches are well advised to take a couple of minutes of training time to ask the athletes to immediately stop and create an instant replay image of the skill. A precise
image is less likely if they wait a week or even a day to create an image of the newly modified technique. Finally, athletes should always image good performances. Replaying execution errors in their minds is practising doing what they don’t want to do.

**SELF-PREPARATION**

Armed with an enhanced awareness of the key mental skills and strategies for attaining and sustaining high levels of performance, athletes and coaches can work towards putting it all together to prepare for big performances (e.g., selection trials) or competitions. Preparation involves much more than just game day; it can involve days (e.g., a golfer preparing for a four-day tournament), weeks (e.g., a competition on every weekend for several months), months (e.g., a cricket team’s tour of the subcontinent) and even years (e.g., Olympic cycles) of planning ahead. Coaches need to recognise that athletes have their own unique needs and demands, so a ‘one size fits all’ approach is not as effective as an individualised approach.

Athletes can develop and continually modify two broad types of routines to package their mental (and physical) preparation into a useful process that works best for them. Precompetition routines include strategies and processes that are implemented in the days leading up to a competition (e.g., visualising potential distractions and how to overcome them, rest and recovery from rigorous training schedules). In contrast, preperformance routines are implemented prior to executing a skill during a competition (e.g., golf putt, tennis serve, basketball free throw).

Routines enable athletes to control their anxiety-related symptoms and help them avoid being distracted by irrelevant cues. They help athletes feel settled and in control before competing so they will have a high level of confidence and an optimistic outlook for the imminent performance. The purpose of these routines is to help athletes begin the competition and initiate skill execution in their ideal performance states.

What is ideal will be different for different athletes. Some will need to be quiet and relaxed, and others will need to be pumped up and energised. Some will need to avoid thinking about the competition until right before it begins, and others will need to mentally prepare throughout the lead-up.

A routine can combine physical warm-up and stretching with mental and emotional preparation. Elements can include relaxation, cue words, music and imagery. Athletes should try a few variations before deciding on a routine to use regularly (i.e., before training as well as before competition).

**SUMMARY**

- Mental skills are integral to helping athletes maximise their performance.
- Coaches can use several techniques or strategies to help their athletes develop an awareness of their motivations and strengths, regulate or manage their behaviours and performances and monitor their progress towards a better mental game.
- Coaches should integrate mental skills training into their coaching practice.
- Mental skills training, like physical, technical and tactical skills training, is a continuous process that requires practice and works best when implemented proactively rather than reactively.

**REFERENCES AND RESOURCES**


