
MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING FOR ATHLETICS

Aaron Weintraub



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Dedication

Dedicated to hard-working, fun-loving athletes
who want to find out how good they can be.

Acknowledgments

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Contents

Dedication	3
Acknowledgments	4
Preface	8
Facing Dramatic Circumstances (Part 1)	11
Introduction	12
Part 1: Preliminary Concepts	15
Chapter 1: Control	17
Chapter 2: Awareness	23
Exercise: The Traffic Light Analogy	
Gathering	
Chapter 3: Discipline	35
Chapter 4: Peak Performance	41
Confident, Not Cocky	
Refined Indifference	
Part 2: Attitude	45
Chapter 5: Motivation	47
Relentlessness	
Mission	
Chapter 6: Perspective	53
Worth Depends on Effort, Not Achievement	
Chapter 7: Respect for the Game and Intensity	61
Assume Nothing	
Chapter 8: Self-Talk	65
Positivism	
Common Patterns of <i>Poor</i> Self-Talk	
Adjusting Poor Self-Talk	

Chapter 9: Confidence	81
Optimistic Explanatory Style	
The Knowledge Curve	
“Slumps”	
Affirmations	
Which Comes First? Success or Confidence	
Summary	
Chapter 10: Arousal Control	97
Fake It Until You Make It	
Poise	
Tension and Relaxation	
Deep Breathing	
Be “Two” Better	
Chapter 11: Enjoy Your Job	109
Part 3: Approach	113
Chapter 12: Preparation	115
Attention to Details	
Practice to Perform in the “Clutch”	
Chapter 13: Know Your Job	123
Aggressiveness Under Control	
Planning Strategy	
Chapter 14: Imagery	131
Chapter 15: Routines	137
Control-Plan-Trust Model	
Chapter 16: Anchoring	141
Part 4: Focus	145
Chapter 17: Presentness	147
Let It Happen (The Positive Way to Say	
“Don’t Press” or “Don’t Choke”)	
Chapter 18: Concentration and Focus	153
Dimensions of Attentional Control	

Chapter 19: Pressure	159
Fear of “Failure”	
Coping With High Expectations	
Chapter 20: “Do Your Job”	165
Part 5: Response	169
Chapter 21: Appropriate Adjustments	171
Effective Rational Response	
Do Not Say “My Bad”	
Avoid the Negative Snowball Effect—Just Do Your Best	
Release the Negative Emotion Attached to the Disappointing Outcome	
Do Not Change Just for the Sake of Change—Trust Your Approach	
Do Not Overadjust—Just Do Your Best	
Do Not Try to “Make Up” for a Mistake—Just Do Your Best	
Imagery: The Way to Fix a Flawed Mechanic During Competition	
Chapter 22: Goal Setting—The SMART+2 System	183
Facing Dramatic Circumstances (Part 2)	191
References	194
About the Author	197

Preface

Do your athletes perform well at certain times but poorly at others? Do they work hard and have the capability but still fail to consistently get the results that you all expect and deserve? Do they know exactly what to do to guarantee a successful performance in “clutch” situations? The solutions to these issues exist not in athletes’ physical skills or abilities but in their mental skills. This book will guide any coach who wants to teach athletes how to bridge the gap between potential and performance and consistently give their best effort. Athletes must be clear about what they want to do, develop their self-awareness, and anchor successful thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. As you read, it will be helpful to have one or more specific performance scenarios in mind (e.g., baseball player, football player, golfer, musician, public speaker, etc.). This book is geared specifically towards coaching athletes, although mental skills training applies to any performance situation.

Mental skills training will significantly enhance performance. As the level of play increases, the impact of the mental side of the game increases, in large part because the differences in athletes’ physical skills diminish. The physical mechanics of sports are often taught with impressive skill, but it is usually a sink-or-swim world when it comes to mental skills. Guidance for young athletes on this critical aspect of the game is nonexistent at worst and spotty at best. Therefore, a coachable, hard-working athlete may consistently perform far below his potential because he is unaware of his deficient mental skills. He may hear comments like “If we could just turn his brain off, he would be one heck of a player,” but he has no strategies for doing it. He has not been taught how to have a singular focus on the task at hand. Professional and Olympic athletes have formal mental skills training readily available, but this course of study is not commonly available to most athletes.

The lucky young athletes are the ones who have parents and coaches who teach mental skills effectively, usually without using the labels “sport psychology” and “mental skills training” (John Wooden is my favorite example of this type of coach). A few universities now have a sport psychologist on staff or an undergraduate course related to coaching the mental game. This progress is great, but unfortunately many hard working coaches do not coach the mental game effectively. Their personalities make it harder rather than easier for athletes to maintain an ideal attitude, focus, and perform. Poor verbal instructions such as “Relax,” “We need...,” or “Don’t...” are commonplace.

I wrote this book because I want to help you help athletes do their best. I also want them to understand that their best is all they can do. They are impressive people if they are trying to reach this lofty goal, and I am honored if you find that my book assists that process.

Sport psychology may seem confusing and complex. It should not. This book will open up the world of mental skills training to you in an easy-to-understand manner. The principles are straightforward and logical, so if athletes can combine desire with discipline, acquiring these skills is inevitable. This book will guide that quest with clear definitions, common examples, relevant quotes, challenging ideas, and interesting stories.

I began thinking of this book while in college in the early 1990s and began to actually write it in graduate school in the late 1990s. I love the question “Why?” The most obvious coaching question is “Why did that team win?” Broken down to its controllable component parts, these questions follow:

- Why did that team or individual perform at that level?
- Why does one person break down under pressure while another breaks through?
- Why does the athlete who played so well one day play so poorly on another?

After a good deal of research, thought, trial-and-error with student-athletes, discussions with experts, and participation as an athlete or coach in well over 1,000 varsity contests, I have a fairly good understanding of how the combination of an athlete’s mental and physical skills leads to his performances, which in turn leads to outcomes such as scoring or winning. This book is designed to share that understanding with you. In the process, it will explain the way to develop mental skills so that an athlete’s outcomes can most likely be the ones that he has always dreamed of.

The study of mental skills herein is a progressive one divided into five parts. Each skill is explained in simple terms. Of course, knowing what to do is much easier than mastering these skills. Mental skills, like physical skills, improve with practice. Your students will need motivation and courage to both learn what to do and do what they know.

Part 1 discusses the foundation skills of control, awareness, and discipline. Part 2 discusses how to optimize *attitude* for performance. Part 3 discusses the skills needed to have the best *approach* possible. Part 4 looks at what to do when it is time to perform (briefly, keep it simple by not thinking too much; just *focus* and *trust your stuff*). Finally, Part 5 addresses *responses*, thus completing the performance cycle. Effective responses lead to effective approaches, and then a quality approach and a “locked-in” focus lead to superior performances. These behaviors combined with a proper attitude throughout will *guarantee* success as it *should* be defined. They will also ensure the best possible chance of achieving positive outcomes, like winning.

Sport psychology has been called the study of what successful athletes do. I am a quote fan, and I have included many sport psychology quotes that relate to the topic being discussed. These quotes demonstrate that many famous athletes have superb mental skills. Your athletes, too, will own these skills if they have enough *desire*,

patience, and persistence. Be pleased with small steps; developing mental skills is a process that takes time and effort. Athletes must take it one step at a time, for if they continuously make appropriate adjustments, they will continually improve. Occasional leaps forward in performance are likely, but no shortcuts exist. Continual improvement, itself, is the essence of approaching potential and success.

Before you begin, I am tempted to wish you luck in your pursuit of excellence. But since one point of all that follows is to take luck out of the equation as much as possible, I will resist. Instead, I wish you personal excellence and growth as you learn to coach athletes towards peak performances. And I trust that because you are sincere in your motivations and disciplined in your approach, the outcomes will work out for you just fine.

Facing Dramatic Circumstances (Part 1)

It is the bottom of the ninth inning in the last game of the Super Regionals. A record crowd is on hand and fired up to watch two powerhouse teams duke it out in pure championship competition. It is “put up” or “shut up” time, because this game will be the final one of the year for the loser and the catapult to the College World Series for the winner. The first two games have been close, but this final game is the best one yet. In the bottom of the second inning, Mark’s team opened the scoring with a single run on a beautiful triple off the center field wall, but the visitors answered with a two-run home run in the top of the fifth. Since then, the pitching has dominated, keeping the score at 2 to 1. Now, it is the bottom of the ninth with men on first and third and two outs, and the team’s best hitter is up to bat. It is “do or die” time. Mark is on deck.

Mark truly loves baseball; his life has revolved around the game for the past 15 years. He is a senior who has had a solid collegiate career. He will probably not get drafted into professional baseball, however, because he stands only 5’9” tall and is an average runner at best. The possibility that this game will be his last playing organized baseball briefly crosses his mind as the count on the current batter goes to 3-2. In the stands, the fans love this excitement. Despite their confidence in the home team, which has already won 45 games this year, many hearts are pounding as though they are trying to escape from their cages. In the dugout and in the stands, palms are sweaty and stomach butterflies are jumping. Through the incredible tension of this moment, the pitcher tries to throw a nasty slider, but it is outside for ball four. Now, Mark must step into the batter’s box.

Is he prepared? (Refer to “Facing Dramatic Circumstances: Part 2” at the end of the book for the conclusion to this story.)

Introduction

Developing and refining my mental game has played a critical role in my success. For years, players have had to develop these skills on their own.

—Dave Winfield, baseball Hall of Famer

For me, learning to have a routine that keeps me focused on things I have control of has been most helpful.

—Tim Salmon, baseball player

Solid training in the mental game allows us to meet obstacles head-on and play with every ounce of our ability.

—Jim Abbott, (one-handed) baseball player

Congratulations. You *try hard* when you perform and you deserve credit. If you are a coach, both you and your athletes try hard in every contest. After any performance is over, if someone asked if you or your team tried hard, your answer would always be “Yes.” But was it truly your “best effort?” It is probably only occasionally that your answer would still be “yes.” Implementing the skills discussed in this book will *guarantee* that any athlete give his “best effort” for each and every performance.

A common misconception in the sports world exists that if a person practices and trains hard enough physically, everything else will magically fall into place. Reality frequently teaches otherwise. In addition to your own experiences, mountains of evidence exist that support the idea that mental skills are critical for an athlete to perform up to his potential. A Web search for the keywords “sport psychology” will reveal millions of links. Over 95 percent of American Olympians in the past 30 years have received formal mental skills training. Today, sport psychologists or mental skills coaches are employed by almost every NFL, MLB, NBA, and NHL team, by most of the world’s top professional golfers and tennis players, by IMG Academies, and by some sports agents.

Mental skills are critical for success in any sport or other performance endeavor. This book will open the door to understanding these skills. Both physical skills training and mental skills training are necessary to approach potential, and a clear understanding is half the battle. This book will specifically explain how mental skills impact performance and help empower you and your athletes to figure out what works so it can be repeated, and what does not work so it can be changed. It will help you to

effectively coach yourself and others to approach your potential. Your athletes will gain awareness of what to look for and what to avoid. By understanding how thoughts impact performances, they will be well on their way to winning the mental battle.

Two broad purposes exist for having effective mental skills: performance enhancement and personal growth. Fortunately, the skills for both are the same. Before any athlete can effectively get the job done, he must precisely *know what to do*. Without guidance, acquisition of mental skills is haphazard and slowed. Systematic improvement to an athlete's mental game can clearly provide an edge over his unguided competition. Athletes who are in a hurry to find out how good they can become will be attracted to this course of study.

Do not accept the idea that getting "hot" is something that merely happens by chance. It is true that an athlete cannot *make* it happen, but he *can* increase the frequency that it happens and its duration. Teach him to accept responsibility for coaching himself towards his best possible performance by putting himself in a position to succeed, doing everything he can control to perform up to his potential. What can he control? That great question will be answered in the pages that follow.

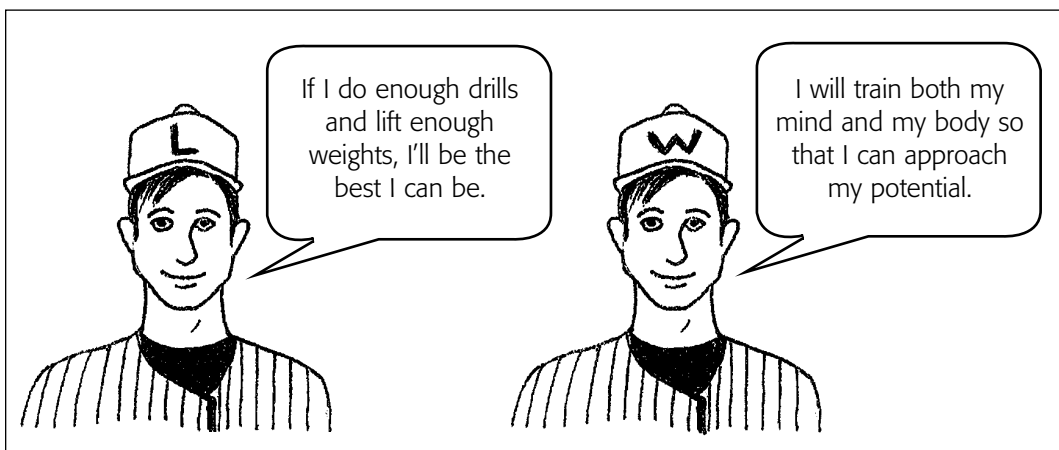


Figure I-1

A Note About the Figures

Throughout this book are figures that show a "loser" on the left (generally denoted by an "L" in the player's hat) and a "winner" on the right (generally denoted by a "W" in the player's hat). The figures could also be labeled "normal" and "exceptional," but the labels "loser" and "winner" drive home the point that proper behaviors guided by strong mental skills are controllable and lead directly to winning more often. The two athletes often look the same but have significantly different thoughts.
