

IMPORTANCE OF MENTAL PREPARATION FOR TOP ATHLETES

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Abstract

Despite popular belief about the usefulness of psychology in sport and the importance of psychological training, there are misconceptions that mental training is useful only for the athletes with severe psychological problems. Athletes in serious crises make up a small part of the sport population (in the US is estimated to be only 10%). The problem of the psychological preparation of athletes as part of training is of great interest, especially now when sports results are extremely high. Psychological preparation can acquire new meanings and perspectives and can be a challenge for the optimization of athletic performance. Another misconception is that the psychological training is meant just for the elite athletes. Psychological skills are necessary to dispose of all athletes of all levels and modes of sports. And finally, probably the biggest misconception is that psychological preparation of athletes gives results immediately. No one can dispute the fact that state of mind has a lot to do with sport performance. Actually, what sport psychology does for the athlete is to teach them to identify the factors that lead to good performance and those that lead to poor performance. However, if their problems are actually outside the sport backgrounds and if they are more reflected in the field of sport than created in the sport environment, a special treatment method of clinical psychology is required, not sport psychology.

Keywords: mental preparation, elite sport, sport psychology

Introduction

It is often the case that many young athletes, characterized in the early stage of their career as the “talents”, fail to realize their potentials and remain only the “talents”, but never become successful athletes with top careers and do not achieve the highest sport results that are expected.

Numerous studies and daily sports practice show that psychological skills are the factor on which depends whether the athletes will realize their potentials or not. These skills are essential to distinguish the individual extraordinary

talented that has become a top athlete from the one also extraordinarily talented athlete who remains unremembered in the sport world. Among the top athletes of equal abilities, slight difference that confers psychological training, can mean a big difference between the Olympic medal and oblivion.

Along with great athletic shape, physical abilities and skills, adequate training and support system for the athletes to achieve their highest potential, concentration is also what is essential, as well as competitive spirit, self-confidence and the ability to resist pressure, ie. the ability to play equally well regardless of external circumstances, requirements of the court or the opponents, the current results, the expectations of the social environment and the public, etc.

According to Epuran (2008), the psychological preparation of the athlete involves “all the strategies and techniques used in training and education to increase the mental ability and personality development of athletes, corresponding to the requirements of an event/sport, in order to achieve superior effects and results in training and competition” (Epuran 2008 cited by Mihăilescu & Cucui 2013).

In addressing this theme, we started from the premise that motivation is the process that governs the choices made by each individual athlete to achieve sports performance. Motivation is expressed by a particular state of psychic tension based on the correlation between perception and thought. The foundation of motivation is represented by all needs and interests of athletic performance. Motivation determines focus and will, and energetically supports the efforts of training and participation in competitions (Mihăilescu et al., 2011).

Some authors say that motivation should be seen as a “function of the relationship between effort and the perceived level of performance - on the one hand - and the expectation of reward (its size) - on the other hand” (Hellriegel et al., 1992).

Athletic performance is “motor performance achieved in an institutionalized social comparison context, which implies inequality in the distribution of rewards” (Teodorescu, 2006). The studied literature considers that “human performance can be explained as a multiplicative factor of motivation and abilities/skills, $P = f(MXA)$ ” (Bologa & Gherghișan, 1994 cited by Haralambie & Mihăilescu, 2010).

Coaches and sports performance specialists seek various ways and means to increase the efficiency of athletes in competitions. Most of them have turned their attention to the development of exercise capacity. However, in the context of the current performance level, of the altitude and instability of performance, it is imperative to find other solutions. In this respect, we

consider beneficial the intervention of specialists on the psyche of the athlete, who must be optimally motivated to cope with sports training and high-level competitions

In other words, the most powerful weapon of elite athletes is their mental strength. Someone will certainly say that it is not always possible. What happens in situations where an athlete is in pain or when he gets some bad news before the competition or match; when he is been watched by a sport scout; when his career depends on the match? It is impossible not to feel the pressure of time, and this is likely to affect his game. During the moments when the pressure is certainly there, it's only the athlete who chooses how it will affect him - whether the athlete will allow himself to feel overwhelmed by this pressure or he will know to use the pressure in his advantage.

We are the results of our own thoughts. If the athlete himself is in a worry, or puts the pressure on himself or thinks how he will fail or lose and he poisons his mind with negative thoughts, it is more likely that his bad thoughts will come true. Athletes develop mental strength to avoid this.

Theoretically speaking, the talent the athlete is born with determines the upper limit of sport performance. If the athlete is talented, he has great chances to succeed. If not, the assumption is that he will not be able to achieve much in sport. However, this is not always the case. In addition, there are talent and skills. Skills can be learnt and achieved through hard work, training and practice and they affect the success in the sport as much as talent itself.

Poor skills limit the talent, while superbly developed skills allow it to grow. In addition, the fact is that there are athletes of average skill and average talent who achieve superior results. These are the athletes who have managed to compensate their deficiencies for mental strength, skill that involves both mental and emotional strength. Mental strength is the ability of athletes to consistently operate at the upper limit of their own talents and skills, regardless of external conditions and pressures of competition or a game.

Mental toughness

Mental toughness has been described as one of the most used but least understood terms in applied sport psychology (Jones et al., 2002). Numerous articles investigating successful sport performers have cited mental toughness as a vital component.

Definitions and characteristics of mental toughness have been proposed by many authors, leading to a diverse range of positive psychological characteristics being associated with mental toughness. Unfortunately, most of the explanations have emanated from anecdotal evidence and personal accounts.

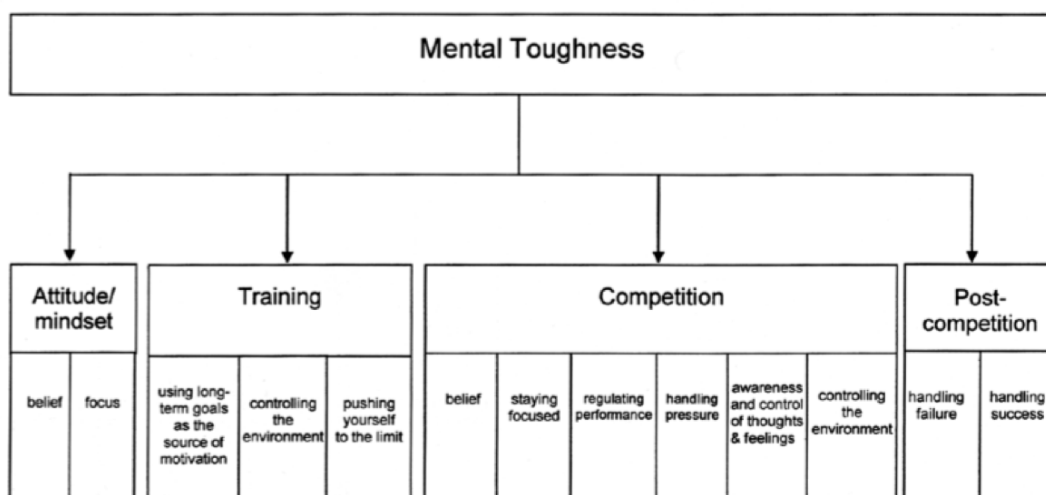
This was highlighted by Jones et al., (2002) who concluded that the knowledge base regarding mental toughness lacked scientific rigor and was replete with contradiction, ambiguity, and conceptual confusion.

Jones et al., (2002) addressed some of the conceptual weaknesses by investigating mental toughness in elite performers. These authors sought to define mental toughness and identify the attributes required to be a mentally tough performer using personal-construct theory as a guiding framework (cf. Kelly, 1955).

The resulting definition emphasized a natural or developed construct that enabled mentally tough performers to cope with the demands of training and competing better than their opponents. Specifically, these athletes were more consistent and superior at remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure. Jones et al. further identified 12 attributes that were considered crucial and fundamental to the makeup of mental toughness. These related to self-belief, desire and motivation, performance focus and lifestyle-related factors, dealing with pressure, anxiety, and pain/hardship associated with top-level performance.

Furthermore, the attributes highlighted how specific characteristics contributed to a performer's state of mental toughness. It is interesting that two recent studies have adopted procedures and recommendations proposed by Jones et al. in the sports of cricket (Bull, Shambrook, James, & Brooks, 2005) and soccer (Thelwell, Weston, & Greenless, 2005). Both studies confirmed Jones et al.'s definition of mental toughness and proposed attributes that were comparable, even though specific to the sports involved. Overall, this suggests that although mental toughness might possess slight variants in specific sports a general template or framework can be developed irrespective of sport.

Figure 1. Template of mental toughness, Jones et al. (2007)



Creasy et al. (2008) built upon previous research by creating a list of components that are critical to mental toughness in sports performance as seen in Table 1. The list was comprised using a survey method. The participants included 22 coaches. During the survey the coaches ranked traits that make up mental toughness and indicated if these traits could be learned. It was found that all excluding 4, 17 and 19 all were thought to be teachable. Here they are:

1. Having an unshakable self-belief in the unique qualities and abilities that make you better than your opponents.
2. Strength: You have to be in good physical and mental condition. You must be psychologically and emotionally prepared.
3. Having an unshakable self-belief in your ability to achieve your competition goals.
4. Have conviction: You have to be a little bit stubborn.
5. Regaining psychological control following unexpected, uncontrollable events (competition specific).
6. Have a strong will to succeed: Do not let setbacks stop you from achieving your goal.
7. Remaining fully focused on the task at hand in the face of competition-specific distractions.
8. Be consistent: Recognize and adjust to change so that you are always able to make a contribution to your team.
9. Not being adversely affected by others' good and bad performances.
10. Be competitive: It is not just about beating your opponent. You have to internalize competitiveness and take pride in what you do.
11. Switching sport focus on and off as required.
12. Personal management: Do not duck potential problems; take on the problems directly to prevent small problems from building into bigger problems.

13. Thriving on the pressure of competition.
14. Take the fight approach: Always be ready to play.
15. Accepting that competition anxiety is inevitable and knowing that you can cope with it.
16. Have passion for what you do.
17. Having an insatiable desire and internalized motives to succeed.
18. Bouncing back from performance setbacks as a result of increased determination to succeed.
19. Remaining fully focused in the face of personal life distractions.
20. Pushing back the boundaries of physical and emotional pain, while still maintaining technique and effort under distress (in training and competition).

This research is helpful because it contributes to better understanding of what defines mental toughness in athletes and how coaches believe mental training could be beneficial. However, this study relies on qualitative data and a small sample size.

In order to understand the concept of mental toughness, information regarding its development in athletes should be examined. Development of mental toughness depends on both of athlete's mindset (dependent on environment) and personality traits (genetic origins) (Crust & Clough, 2011). It is accepted that both nature and nurture play a role (Crust & Clough, 2011).

One study by Bull et al. (2005) focused on understanding development of mental toughness using a sample of elite English cricket players. The research resulted in a visual display of that can be seen in Figure 2 and Table 1. Researchers describe this structural representation as an aide in understanding how environment and personal attributes interact in forming consistent mental toughness of some cricket players.

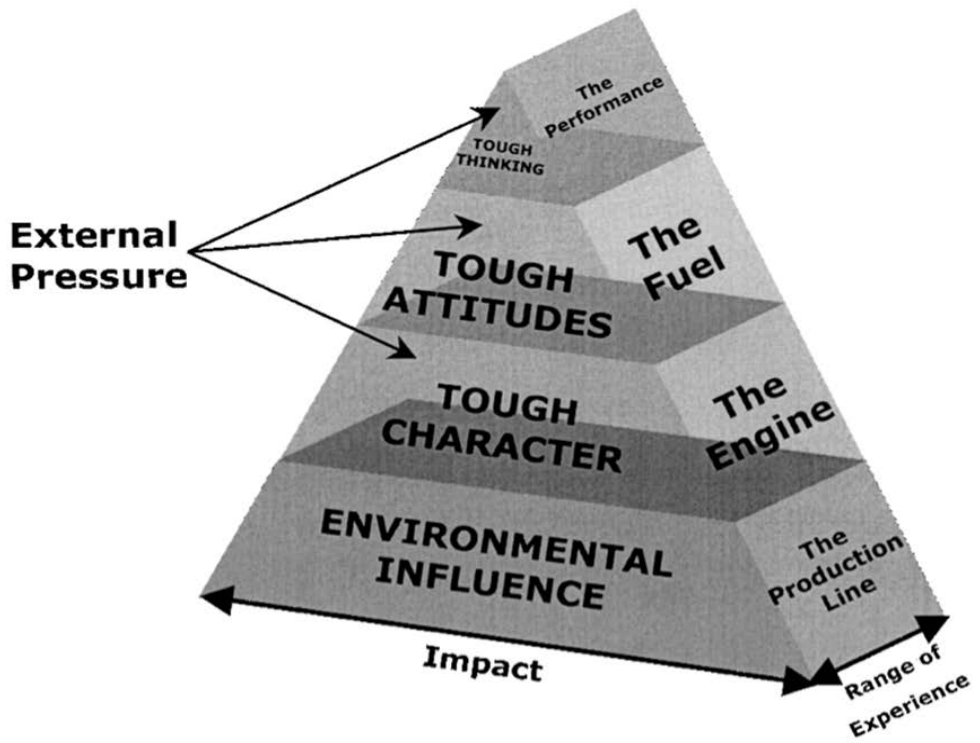


Figure 2. Bull et al. (2005) structural pyramid

Table 1. Structural categories (Bull et.al., 2005)

Table 2
General Dimensions, Global Themes and Structural Categories Resulting From the Analysis of the Mental Toughness-Focused Interviews

General dimension	Global theme	Structural category location
Developmental factors	● Parental influence	Environmental Influence
	● Childhood background	
Personal responsibility	● Exposure to foreign cricket	Environmental influence
	● Independence	Tough character
	● Self-reflection	
	● Competitiveness with self as well as others	
	Dedication and commitment	● Exploit learning opportunities
● Belief in quality preparation		
● Self-set challenging targets		
● Opportunities to survive early setbacks		Environmental influence
● Needing to "earn" success		
● "Never say die" mindset		Tough attitudes
● "Go the extra mile" mindset		
● Determination to make the most of ability		
Belief	● Resilient confidence	Tough character
	● Belief in making the difference	Tough attitudes
	● Robust self-confidence	Tough thinking
	○ Overcoming self-doubts	
	○ Feeding off physical condition	
○ Maintain self-focus		
Coping with pressure	● Thrive on competition	Tough attitudes
	● Willing to take risks	
	● Thinking clearly	Tough thinking
	○ Good decision-making	
	○ Keeping perspective ○ Honest self-appraisal	

Mental strength is best described by the four elements:

- emotional flexibility - the ability to cope with unexpected emotional events, but at the same time to remain in balance, positive, without the need to defend ourselves (The opposite case is the athlete who gets angry by the unjust decision of a judge, and has the need to prove faults, which shows the rigidity and the ability to experiencing emotional crisis that affects his concentration, communication at the court and further game flow);

- emotional responsiveness - the ability to maintain emotional control and "contact with the game" under pressure (for example, an athlete who begins to play without will and lifeless when he loses, is shown to have a low level of mental strength);

- emotional power - the ability to maintain an equal level of grit and competitive spirit no matter of circumstances (eg. either in defeat or superior win);

- emotional recovery - the ability to quickly return to a positive emotional state, a rapid recovery from the disappointment of an error or omission with the same motivation to continue.

This may seem to us like mental strength has just to do with emotions. However, it refers to the entire mental and physical condition, but especially requires good emotional control. What do you envision, how you act, what you eat, how you sleep and rest, what is your physical condition..all this has a major impact on emotions at all times. Mental strength is not only “mental”. It is “physical”. The body is “physical”, talents and skills are “physical”, emotions have a neurochemical basis, which means that they are also “physical”, as well as thinking and visualization, which are electrochemical processes.

Some athletes think that their thoughts have little or no influence on what is been shown at the court and that these things are separate from each other. However, emotions are real, although they are not tangible, but they have influence on sport achievements, as well as the talent and skills.

Mental strength is something you learn. This is a skill that is practiced and perfected like any other skill. If you are not mentally strong, it is simply because you have not learned to be.

True energy to succeed in the sport includes positive emotions, self-confidence, challenge, enjoyment of activity, fighting spirit and a positive attitude. Fear, anger, fatigue, negative emotions and discouragement pull down the whole system. Maintaining a positive attitude, programming the mind for success, positive expectations and focus on positive outcomes. Learning how to quickly accept the mistakes, not to allow frustrations on the field/court or practicing some pre competition routines that serve to introduce the athlete automatically at a desired mental state that he needs, then watching to failure as a step on the road to success, taking responsibility, accepting challenges, dare to move when it is needed most, are some of the characteristics of a mentally strong athletes who have perfected their mental preparation to the extent that it can be measured by their results and achievements and sizes of their careers.

Mentally tough athletes know how to define and recognize and are always looking for their inner ideal mental state. Any deviation from the optimal level of self-confidence, relaxation, concentration, motivation, energy and positive emotions in the competition (or in training) can be recognized by them and they seek to compensate it immediately. That can be achieved by the different techniques adopted, and they thrive because they have learned their mind to be

sure, able to overcome frustration, resistant to negative emotions and self-criticism. Simply, this is about disciplined programming themselves to be positive and, if necessary, include, amplify or reduce the “button” that manage their internal state.

The road to this success is not easy, quick or simple. It requires a lot of effort and work, the most common and professional help of sport psychologists, and it is easier to be achieved within the supportive social environment.

The key is that athlete should never limit himself believing that he is not capable enough, smart enough, or that he doesn't have enough born talent to succeed in the sport. We are what we make ourselves to be. Our future is much more than what is written in our genes. Mental toughness can be the most powerful weapon of every athlete, and what athletes learn using techniques of mental training in sports, he needs and can help him also in the arena of life.

Setting small goals, techniques of visualization, breathing techniques and relaxation, autogenous trainings, attention control techniques are just some of the effective methods in working with athletes used by sport psychologists. Also, hypnosis falls into one of the techniques of mental preparation used by psychologists who work with athletes, although this method is much more popular in the world than here. Hypnosis helps athletes to currently release the tension and negative stress that blocks their knowledge and skills. Hypnosis eliminates every fear and negative thoughts, replacing them with a sense of peace and confidence in order to achieve top performances and results.

Having psychological help allows athletes to successfully cope with the challenges and temptations they face every day. It also enables:

- Control of thoughts and emotions.
- Increasing motivation and commitment to the sport.
- Raising self-confidence to a higher level.
- It teaches athletes how to stay focused under pressure, better focused and concentrated.
- Encourages teamwork and togetherness, creates a good atmosphere within the team.
- It helps athletes recover faster from injuries and as painlessly as possible to pass through this period.

An increasing number of athletes on the model of top athletes, like Kobe Bryant, Tiger Woods, LeBron James ... (which have already publicly talked about it), turn to meditation techniques, to improve their performance. They say that meditation helps them to get rid of stress, increase attention and maintain their focus and has the overall positive effect on emotional well-being.

Control of their own thoughts and inner dialogues, also give good results in practice.

On the Pyramid of mental preparation skills, sports psychologists from the Ohio Center for Sport Psychology (Ohio Center for Sport Psychology, 2017), identified three phases and three levels in the mental preparation of athletes. The phases are:

1. Long term preparation,
2. The immediate preparation for the match or competition,
3. Preparation in the course of a single match or competition.

The Performance Pyramid levels - Ohio Center for Sport Psychology:

Level I - These mental skills constitute a broad base for attaining long-term goals, learning, and sustaining daily practice (social skills, goals and responsibilities, motivation and attitude). They are needed on a day-by-day basis for long periods of time, often months and years.

Level II - These skills are used immediately before performance to prepare for performance (visualization and inner dialogue). They may be used just before competition begins, or immediately before a specific performance action, such as golf shot or free throw in basketball.

Level III - These skills are used during actual performance behavior (concentration, anger control, control of emotions).

Center for Sport Psychology (2017) states for the Nine Most Important Skills of Mental Toughness of the Successful Athletes:

1. Attitude

Successful athletes:

Realize that attitude is a choice.

Choose an attitude that is predominately positive.

View their sport as an opportunity to compete against themselves and learn from their successes and failures.

Pursue excellence, not perfection, and realize that they, as well as their coaches, teammates, officials, and others are not perfect.

Maintain balance and perspective between their sport and the rest of their lives.

Respect their sport, other participants, coaches, officials, and themselves.

2. Motivation

Successful athletes:

Are aware of the rewards and benefits that they expect to experience throughout their sport participation.

Are able to persist through difficult tasks and difficult times, even when these rewards and benefits are not immediately forthcoming.

Realize that many of the benefits come from their participation, not the outcome.

3. Goals and Commitment

Successful athletes:

Set long-term and short-term goals that are realistic, measurable, and time-oriented.

Are aware of their current performance levels and are able to develop specific, detailed plans for attaining their goals.

Are highly committed to their goals and to carrying out the daily demands of their training programs.

4. People Skills

Successful athletes:

Realize that they are part of a larger system that includes their families, friends, teammates, coaches, and others.

When appropriate, communicate their thoughts, feelings, and needs to these people and listen to them as well.

Have learned effective skills for dealing with conflict, difficult opponents, and other people when they are negative or oppositional.

5. Self-Talk

Successful athletes:

Maintain their self-confidence during difficult times with realistic, positive self-talk.

Talk to themselves the way they would talk to their own best friend.

Use self-talk to regulate thoughts, feelings and behaviors during competition.

6. Mental Imagery

Successful athletes:

Prepare themselves for the competition by imagining themselves performing well in competition.

Create and use mental images that are detailed, specific, and realistic.

Use imagery during competition to prepare for action and recover from errors and poor performances.

7. Dealing Effectively with Anxiety

Successful athletes:

Accept anxiety as part of sport.

Realize that some degree of anxiety can help them perform well.

Know how to reduce anxiety when it becomes too strong, without losing their intensity.

8. Dealing Effectively with Emotions

Successful athletes:

Accept strong emotions such as excitement, anger, and disappointment as part of the sport experience.

Are able to use these emotions to improve, rather than interfere with high level performance

9. Concentration

Successful athletes:

Know what they must pay attention to during each game or sport situation.

Have learned how to maintain focus and resist distractions, whether they come from the environment or from within themselves.

Are able to regain their focus back when concentration is lost during competition.

Have learned how to play “here-and-now”, without regards to either past or anticipated future events.

Although each of the nine skills is important, its primary importance will occur during one of three phases: long-term development, immediate preparation for performance, and during performance itself.

Conclusion

Nowadays, the successful practice of sport puts great demands on athletes and requires exceptional physical and mental preparation. Skills and abilities are constantly improved, the performance criteria shift towards higher values and competition is getting stronger day by day. Therefore, if athlete wants to achieve the most in any field of sport, total commitment and excellent self-control are required of him. There is a little place for the improvisation in top sport and continuously good results are achieved only by those who work continuously and systematically, using all the resources at their disposal.

Sport fields are not only looking for physically ready and well-trained athletes, but also for people that are mentally ready to achieve the desired success or to accept failure and overcome it. Mind commands, body serves. What the mind thinks it can not do, body cannot either. In order to achieve certain success, the mind must be familiar with it, restrained and trained, because it is a state of mind that differs an average athlete from the one who wins.

Acting this way will make his brain, body and emotional states become more flexible, more adaptable and more efficient. Nowadays, nearly all top athletes are very well physically and technical - tactically prepared and they know almost everything and can perform everything. However, experience shows

that for achieving good results in sport, physical qualities have never been the only important thing but also is mental strength.

Motivation is “what drives action” and behavior reflects the actions taken to achieve goals, so, motivations determine individual behavior.

Motivation is a prerequisite of sports practice and especially, of sports performance, determined both by internal and external motivational factors. These factors depend on how the basic needs of human beings are experienced, but also on the action of external, social and educational factors.

In high performance sport, motivation is a key factor for achieving athletic performance, without which athletes would not be determined to cope with the sports training effort in order to improve their psychomotor abilities.

Sports performance can be influenced by the intensity of motivation, as it is known that optimally motivated athletes generally tend to achieve better performance. So, motivation is one of the factors that contribute to individual athletic performance; along with motivation, performance is strongly influenced by the athlete’s skills, abilities, biomotor qualities, by the understanding of objectives and the opportunity to achieve remarkable results. (Cucui. A, Cucui. G., 2014).

Top achievements of each individual are just a reflection of faith in himself and dedicated work someone invests in himself in order to, most effectively, help himself to prove that he is good enough.

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