

# Top 10 Guiding Principles for Mental Training

By Sean McCann, Ph.D., Sports Psychologist, U.S. Olympic Committee

## **1. Mental training can't replace physical training and talent.**

We haven't seen any Olympic athlete who succeeded without doing the physical and technical work, even though we have worked with some of the most mentally talented athletes in the world. The reality is that even an exceptionally talented athlete who has not prepared well physically loses confidence and is vulnerable in competition. The best and easiest confidence is that which comes from the knowledge that you are as prepared, or more prepared, than your competitors and that you are physically capable of a winning performance.

## **2. Physical training and physical ability aren't enough to succeed consistently.**

On the other hand, we have worked with a number of athletes whose coaches called them "the most talented athlete on the team," yet these athletes never achieved international success. These physically gifted athletes were not able to manage the mental demands of the sport. Some athletes can't handle the focus and discipline of training, and others can't handle the pressure and stress of competition. If you are lacking in either of these areas, you may succeed at times, but you will not succeed consistently.

## **3. A strong mind may not win an Olympic medal, but a weak mind will lose one.**

It is very difficult to predict that a mentally strong athlete will win an Olympic medal, because of all the factors that play into winning a medal. Success for any athlete is never certain; there are so many variables—training, health, finances, coaching to name a few. On the other hand, one of the easiest predictions to make is who will fail under Olympic pressure. Athletes with an obviously weak mental game virtually never win at the biggest competitions.

## **4. Coaches frequently don't know what their athletes are thinking.**

Although all great coaches pay close attention to the behavior of their athletes on the field of play, very few have a similarly detailed knowledge of what their athletes are thinking or should be thinking. Few coaches know enough about the specific mental "demons" athletes have, so they often are unable to intervene when they need to at competition. We have come to the conclusion that like politics or religion, it is an area many coaches are afraid to ask about. Some coaches know that "psychological factors" were the cause of an athlete failing in competition, but many of these coaches are not aware of the athlete's mental state before they compete.

## **5. Thoughts affect behavior. Consistency of thinking = consistency of behavior.**

It is a simple but powerful idea that all sport behavior starts with a thought. Much of coaching focuses on making sport behavior more consistent and controllable, but much less of coaching focuses on making thinking more consistent and controllable. Because of this, many coaches are surprised not only by the difference between their athletes' practice behavior and competition behavior but also by the fact that the difference comes about because of how their athletes are thinking. One goal of sport psychology is to understand and control the thinking process, which will lead to understanding and control of behavior.

## **6. Coaches often have a different view of changing technical v. mental mistakes.**

As sport psychologists, we are optimistic about the ability to work on mental mistakes. Thus we often are surprised when coaches are willing to write off an athlete as a "choker" when they repeat mental mistakes in competition. These often are the same coaches who literally will work for years with an athlete on a repeated technical mistake. To a coach who says "I

don't think they'll ever do it," we ask "How many times have you worked specifically on changing the mental mistakes? What drills have you tried? How do you give athletes feedback on their mental mistakes? Do the athletes know exactly how they should think? Have you had this discussion?"

### **7. Coaches must be involved in the mental training process.**

In sport psychology, after a strong period of training before the season, we have heard coaches say: "Well, now it is all mental. Now it is up to the sport psychologist!" Although it is nice to feel important to a team's success, we have learned from hard experience that it is wrong for coaches to "outsource" mental training and sport psychology to a sport psychology consultant. We have learned that many elite coaches feel out of their comfort zone when dealing with mental training issues and fear asking probing questions about how an athlete and feels. We also have learned to push coaches to go past their fears and get used to coaching the mental as well as the physical athlete.

If coaches don't become the prime provider of sport psychology for their teams, they will miss all kinds of teaching opportunities and chances for excellence. At worst, coaches who are unaware of their athletes' mental skill-building will coach in ways that oppose or undermine the mental skills acquired. The bottom line is that coaches must be involved in mental training for it to be successful.

### **8. Sometimes it is okay to force athletes to take the time to do mental training.**

The USOC's Sport Psychology Department's philosophy on this topic has evolved over the past 10 years. In the past, we were unwilling to say that all teams should do some form of mental training. We had been fairly passive, waiting for coaches to approach us with requests for service. Unfortunately, many of those requests came from coaches who had seen their athletes melt down in the biggest competition of their life. Obviously, it is too late at that point!

Many coaches seem willing to accept an athlete's reassurance, "My mental game is just fine." Why, when you wouldn't ask athletes to determine on their own if their technique is "just fine," do you let them avoid working on their mental game for years until a crisis forces them to admit they need work? At the USOC, we are now comfortable pushing athletes into doing the mental training work, even if they don't always see the value at first.

### **9. Like any other skill, mental skills must be measured to maximize performance of those skills.**

"What gets measured gets done." This old expression from business writer Peter Lynch is useful for coaching as well. Just as ski coaches time their teams' training runs or basketball coaches calculate free throw shooting percentages, application of mental skills can be measured. Moreover, they must be measured if they are to change. Once you think of mental skills as behaviors to be measured, you can begin to use your own coaching creativity to teach, modify and increase the use of mental skills.

### **10. Coaches need to think about their own mental skills.**

Most coaches readily can see that the same skills they are teaching their athletes also are useful for their own work in coaching. With the amount of pressure coaches face, use of mental skills such as the ability to manage emotions, control arousal, game plan and simulate pressure all are useful for coaches.