



SRA Mental Toolkit

Following are some very useful mental tools for coaches and players. There are five very basic tools often referred to in sports psychology that athletes can use to achieve a mental edge. They are the following:

- 1) Mental Log
- 2) Affirmations
- 3) Relaxation Techniques
- 4) Visualization and Imagery
- 5) Goal Setting

Mental Log:

This has to do with reflecting on one's own thinking processes.

Some coaches have players keep a journal or log after every game of their thoughts and feelings before, during, and after the competition. Then, the player is simply asked to compare his or her thoughts and feelings on a day he or she played well versus the thoughts and feelings on a day he or she played poorly.

This can be a useful tool if you choose to use it, but it should be applied mostly to the high school age groups. We recommend that you have players at least take some time to reflect on their own thoughts and feelings before and especially after every game. What is going through their heads before, during, and after the competition? Do they notice a difference in their mental focus on the days they perform well versus the days they perform poorly? Most likely they do. This is a powerful demonstration of what the mental edge can do for your performance.

Affirmations:

Affirmations are the "I can" of sports psychology, and they are meant to improve self-confidence and self-esteem. If players practice telling themselves that they can do whatever it is that they want to accomplish, they will have a mental edge in accomplishing that task.

This is often referred to as a "self-fulfilling prophecy". This relates to telling ourselves that we can or cannot do something, which results in effort or the lack thereof in accomplishing a task, which ultimately affects the outcome. It is amazing how much

the body responds to the mind. “Psychosomatic” is a term used to describe how the body (somatic) responds to the mind (psycho). For example, it is a known fact that mental stress can lead to more physical illness, or “psychosomatic” illness. Mind and body are intertwined, and you have the most control over your mind. When the body follows the mind, you are achieving a mental edge.

Consider a difficult preseason fitness session, and a player tells himself halfway through the run that he’s just not going to make it. The instant that thought runs through his head, he begins to focus on the burn in his legs, the heavy breathing in his chest, or the angry teammate who says, “This sucks!” Suddenly, he feels his mental focus and positive attitude escaping him like a car running out of gas. His effort diminishes, and he finally gives up.

With confidence (not cockiness), we can accomplish anything, and we can practice developing our confidence with affirmations. Don’t underestimate the power of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Tell yourself you can, and the power of the mind will be with you.

Relaxation Techniques:

Many players experience extreme anxiety in game situations, which can hurt their performance. But players ARE in control of their emotions (remember the self-fulfilling prophecy?). There are many techniques one can use to relax oneself in a stressful situation, and this has everything to do with composure.

One very basic relaxation technique is simply being aware when you are too anxious and literally telling yourself you can calm down. This is one of the many uses of affirmations. The difficult step is becoming very aware of your own anxiety, which takes practice.

Another great technique is learning to breath. Players can learn to breath deeply from the belly versus breathing shortly from the chest to slow their heart rate and reduce anxiety. Simply smiling can also help a lot, as it is known to have a calming effect on the body.

Here is a great experiment on belly breathing by Colleen Hacker:

“Sit comfortably on a chair or lie quietly on your back on the floor. Put one hand on your belly and one hand on your chest. Keep your hands flat, with palms down. Practice taking a few chest breaths so that when you inhale, your chest expands, and when you exhale, your chest retracts. Keep your mouth open while you inhale and exhale. Notice how that feels. Now, take another deep breath, but this time breathe from the belly. You’ll know you’re breathing from the belly if your belly expands as though a string were pulling it out as you inhale, and your belly drops back down as you exhale. Note the difference between the belly breaths and the chest breaths. For the next few minutes, practice belly breathing.”

Notice that Colleen Hacker mentions “practice”, and it truly takes practice to master relaxation techniques (to master ANY mental technique, for that matter). Try to make it a habit to respond to stressful situations by focusing on belly breathing, telling yourself you can calm down, and smile. You’ll rebound much quicker.

Visualization and Imagery:

Visualization and imagery is meant to improve focus and concentration. What the mind sees, the body achieves. This goes beyond affirmations in that one actually visualizes an athletic experience in one's own mind in order to "see" how to accomplish the desired outcome.

A lot of folks would simply call this day-dreaming, but it's much more than that (although day-dreaming about championships helps too). During true imagery training, a player vividly creates an athletic experience in his or her mind from the beginning to the desired end, usually with the help of a professional. Without getting into any scientific explanations, imagery helps the desired outcome become more likely in a game situation.

Consider a player who scores a goal after imagining in her own mind how she would handle a certain game situation like a breakaway. Having already "seen" the desired outcome and how to achieve it, the player is better prepared to make the best out of that situation. It comes more automatically.

For imagery to be really effective, one must actually try to see, hear, smell, and feel the experience in one's own mind as it would happen in real life. We will not get into that much depth of mental imagery training here, as it takes professional guidance. However, players can begin to use the basics of this technique to their advantage when preparing for a game. For example, think of a strategy or tactic you are trying to accomplish for a given game, and "see" in your own mind how you will help the team carry out that strategy. Or, think of a personal goal you are trying to accomplish for a particular game, and see it accomplished in your own mind's eye. And please, never stop dreaming!

Goal Setting:

"Goals are more than wishes, hopes, and dreams. Dreaming is important in sport and in life, but dreams lack the observable, measurable behaviors required for achieving the end result." - Colleen Hacker

The goals you set for yourself should be both short-term and long-term, challenging, realistic, measurable, and there must be an *action plan* for achieving each goal as defined by you.

For example, a player may want to improve his long-ball accuracy, which is defined as striking 20 accurate long-balls in a row to a player 30 yards away, such that the receiving player doesn't have to take more than a step to receive the ball out of the air. The player who set this goal would then come up with an *action plan* to achieve the goal by, for example, first striking at least 5 balls accurately to a teammate after every practice for a week, then 10 balls, then 15 balls, and finally 20 balls within a deadline of four weeks.

This type of goal is what is called a *performance goal*, which is a goal that depends entirely on the individual's ability to achieve the goal. *Outcome goals* are those that focus on the end result, which are only partially under one's control. An example is winning the championship of a tournament, or becoming a starting member of a team.

For every one outcome goal, you should have at least three performance goals that would help you achieve that outcome. You should also have at least three steps in your action plan to achieve each performance goal.

For the player who makes a commitment to work on goal-setting, goals work.

Goal Setting Assignment:

Following is a useful exercise to practice goal setting. Players are to come up with ONE 30-day *performance* goal (most of will come up with *outcome* goals without guidance, which are fine for a start, but not enough). It is not enough to say “progress in my skills and playing ability” or “get in shape”. Players should be more specific, such as “I will improve my shooting accuracy” or “I will improve my 40-yrd sprint, vertical and broad jump”.

Then the player should define his or her goal in very specific detail. For example, for improving one’s shooting accuracy, one might define that as “Striking a dead ball on the 18 accurately into the upper 90-degree corners of the goal 15 out of 20 times.” Or, for improving one’s 40-yrd sprint and vertical jump, one might simply define that as beating a baseline score previously measured.

Finally, the player should come up with a realistic ACTION PLAN for achieving his or her goal. For example, for improving one’s shooting accuracy, one might come up with the following action plan:

“I will find 20 minutes at least three times per week to practice my shooting accuracy. I will start with trying to place at least 5 out of 20 shots in a row from the 18-yard line in the upper 90-degree corners of the goal. I will then progress to at least 10 out of 20 shots in a row within 15 days. I will achieve my goal of accurately placing 15 out of 20 shots in a row in the upper 90-degree corners by 30 days. If I reach 15 shots in a row before 30 days, I will increase the target to 20 goals in a row and add more as needed.”

