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MENTAL TOUGHNESS

**Dr. Neal Sports Psychology**



Mark Coogan, Head Women’s Cross Country coach and Distance coach at Dartmouth College.  Coogan was a member of the U.S. Olympic team in 1996 competing in the marathon.

“I coach a college cross country and track team and I have noticed over the years that there are always a few individuals on the team that have the physical attributes that should make them All-American track athletes. They have all of the physical gifts needed to be a great runner. Many of these athletes never reach their athletic potential. If there is no physical reason why they are not reaching their potential, then their lack of success must be attributable to something else. I believe the research supports that their inability to achieve their athletic potential stems from their psychological side.”

**Purpose**

Psychological characteristics such as mental toughness, goal setting, imagery, realistic performance evaluation and commitment have been shown to be the difference between a medal winner in the Olympics and non-medal winners, Abbot and Collins (2003). Psychology plays an essential role in the ability of individuals to fulfill their athletic potential. Here we will focus on mental toughness.

Mental toughness is a broad subject that can be researched in many different ways. I will focus on what I believe are the most important components of mental toughness: the attributes that make up the belief system of a mentally tough athlete and the most important psychological skills needed for mental toughness.

**Definition of Mental Toughness**

Mental toughness is having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to normally cope better than your opponents with the many demands (competition, training, lifestyle) that sport places on a performer and, specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident and in control under pressure Jones et al. (2002). Mentally tough competitors also have the unique ability to exert control over the varying demands placed upon them in training and their personal life.

**Review of Research Literature**

Excelling at sport is difficult. The majority of individuals who participate in a sport never reach the elite level. Athletic talent is multidimensional. It combines a combination of anthropometric, physical and psychological factors.  Athletes can compensate for disadvantages in one component of talent with strengths in another.  Athletic talent moves beyond the physical and having strong psychological skills such as good attitude and mental preparation are extremely important in the conversion of potential to achievement Abbot and Collins (2004).

The proper mindset, having the right mental attitude, is needed to excel at sport. All top-level athletes have a mental toughness. According to Jones, Hanton and Connaughton (2007) there are four attributes that make up the belief system of mentally tough performers. The four beliefs are: (

1) Having an unshakable self-belief to achieve goals

(2) Having an inner arrogance

(3) Having a belief that you can get over any obstacle

(4) Having a belief that your desire will ultimately result in fulfilling your potential.

**Unshakable Self-Belief**

Mentally tough athletes have developed an unshakable self-belief that they have qualities and abilities greater than opponents. The athlete has a total awareness, a total self-belief, learned from years of deliberate practice. The athlete knows what it took to get to the elite level and knows how to perform at that level Thelwell et al. (2005).

Research states that it will take a long time for a real belief in an athlete to build. The more the athletes demonstrated their abilities to overcome specific challenges and reach certain targets, the more it raised their self-belief and confidence. The athletes learned that they could achieve their goals. This belief is built on a very solid foundation; it’s not about hoping and wishing, it’s about knowing as a result of what the athletes have done Jones, Hanton and Connaughton (2007).  In Thelwell’s research on elite soccer players, having total self-belief at all times that you will achieve success was ranked as the most important attribute an athlete can have Thelwell et al. (2005).

Coogan says:

“When I lived in Boulder Colorado and was training for the Olympic Games I would come in contact with elite track and field coaches from across the globe. I remember one particular conversation with a South African Olympic coach named Bobby McGee about underperforming in races. The conversation drifted to how beliefs and expectations influence performance.  We agreed that most people under-perform in races because of not having that needed unshakable belief in performance. Recently, I came across an article in a marathon journal that quoted McGee on the way runners perform. McGee again emphasized that most people under-perform in races and that he believes only 9 percent of athletes perform up to their potential. These underperforming runners haven’t completed the mental component of race training; they don’t believe they will perform well. McGee feels they are fearful of being too uncomfortable during the race and they’re fearful of falling short of their race goal. As a result, they psych themselves out of a good performance. There’s a weight of expectation. People become attached to a certain outcome in a race. They run with a brick in their back pocket and end up putting too much stress on themselves. It’s like carrying around a piece of that wall with you, instead of leaving it crumbled on the side of the road” Farb, S. (2008).

Over the course of McGee’s coaching career, he has seen a mental trend: People who have been ill or injured and miss training might get to a race maybe 85 to 90 percent prepared to perform up to their potential. They don’t expect to do well. McGee says that in most cases they do exceptionally well. Then they go away, train hard, have expectations for the next race, and don’t do well.  McGee states it’s the weight of expectation without complementary training for the brain that undermines many athletes along the way Farb, S. (2008).  These runners lack the self-belief to be elite. Athletes can have the physical talent to perform well, to be an All-American, but they lack the unshakable belief that it takes to be a champion.

**Inner Arrogance**

The mentally tough athlete will have an inner arrogance that helps contribute to the belief that success is achievable. These athletes can look at their talents and truly know that they have what it takes to achieve athletically at the highest levels. They believe that when they set their minds to something they will accomplish it. One elite athlete describes it as, “… that inner arrogance, that bit of an attitude towards things that I set my mind to. It is never ever giving up and knowing that if I just persevere, I know that I am going to be able to do it.  I believe I will be able to do it” Jones, Hanton & Connaughton (2007).  An example of a team that did not have that inner arrogance was the 1988 Olympic Wrestling Team, who did not have their best performances at the Olympics. The team was favored to win many medals, but it had a lackluster performance at the games. In interviews after the Olympics the wrestlers felt that they experienced negative feelings and irrelevant and irregular patterns of thought which lead to disappointing results Gould et al. (1999). They did not have the inner arrogance because of negative feelings to perform up to expectations.

**Getting Over Obstacles**

The mentally tough athlete will be able to fight through any obstacle that may be put in his / her way. It does not matter what the obstacle is the mentally tough athlete will invariably overcome such problems. It is knowing how you are going to punch through it and then learning from that experience. Thelwell, Weston and Greenlees (2005) stated in their study on defining and understanding mental toughness in soccer that players claimed that to be mentally tough you should always cope better than your opponents with the specific demands of the game rather than generally cope better.

**Belief That Desire Will Ultimately Result In Fulfilled Potential**

The fourth attribute describes how the belief in their desire (hunger) ultimately results in mentally tough performers’ fulfilling their potential. In Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, et al. (1999) the authors looked at a team that won a gold medal in the 1996 Summer Olympics. The team embraced the Olympic pressure. The team had an attitude that that they were going to win it all. There was no way they were not going to win the gold medal. The athletes viewed this attribute as having the belief that one can actually be that good, that one can actually achieve their goal and this belief enabled them to truly know what they can realistically achieve. Other teams at the Atlanta Olympics were not as successful because they did not ultimately believe they could win the gold medal. The reason the athletes gave for not getting a medal included ignoring mental preparation. There was too much emphasis placed on physical conditioning and the athletes were over-trained and could not have the desire to mentally prepare to win the competition Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, et al. (1999).

**Psychological Skills of Mentally Tough Athletes**

Mental toughness is a broad term that encompasses resilience, the ability to cope with pressure, persistence, focus, and the capacity to bounce back from setbacks. Here are several strategies that coaches and sports psychologists often use to help athletes develop mental toughness:

* Goal Setting:
  + Establish clear, measurable, and challenging goals.
  + Break down long-term goals into short-term objectives.
  + Ensure goals are process-focused (on actions) as well as outcome-focused (on results).
* Self-Talk:
  + Teach athletes to recognize and modify negative self-talk.
  + Encourage positive affirmations and mantras.
  + Use cue words to trigger a focused and resilient mindset.
* Visualization and Mental Imagery:
  + Practice visualizing successful performance.
  + Use mental imagery to rehearse strategies and responses to various scenarios.
* Focus Training:
  + Use exercises to enhance concentration, such as mindfulness meditation.
  + Train athletes to stay in the present moment and not get distracted by past mistakes or future outcomes.
* Stress and Anxiety Management:
  + Teach breathing techniques to control physiological responses to stress.
  + Develop pre-performance routines to instill a sense of control.
* Adversity Training:
  + Incorporate challenging situations into training to simulate stress and pressure.
  + Use failure in training as an opportunity to learn and build resilience.
* Feedback and Reflection:
  + Provide constructive feedback focusing on effort and improvement rather than just outcomes.
  + Encourage self-reflection to learn from both successes and failures.
* Routine Development:
  + Help athletes develop pre-performance routines that promote a sense of control and confidence.
  + Encourage consistent training, recovery, and nutrition routines to build discipline.
* Social Support:
  + Foster a supportive environment with teammates, coaches, and family.
  + Build strong relationships within the team to provide a network for emotional support.
* Psychological Skills Training:
  + Introduce techniques such as relaxation, concentration, and imagery exercises.
  + Offer regular mental skills training sessions as part of the overall training program.
* Exposure to Pressure:
  + Gradually increase the pressure in training environments to acclimate athletes to competition stress.
  + Organize practice competitions or simulate high-pressure situations.
* Coping Skills:
  + Teach athletes to recognize what they can control and let go of what they can't.
  + Develop strategies for dealing with adversity, such as problem-solving and seeking support.
* Mindset Education:
  + Encourage a growth mindset, where athletes view challenges as opportunities to improve.
  + Discuss the mental aspects of performance openly to normalize it.