

# HOW TO BUILD MENTAL TOUGHNESS

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1996, the Australian sport's fans witnessed a surreal moment. At this time, the golfer Greg Norman was at the peak of his career and at the top of the world ranking since more than a decade. Heading into the final round of the US Masters, the greatest major tournaments, he was leading by six strokes and looked certain to claim the famous and most wanted green jacket given to the winner. However, after playing beautifully the first 3 days, he came out the last day and played terrible golf. In one of the worst final day performances in the history of the game, Norman lost a six-stroke lead in the final round and lost the Masters to Nick Faldo by five strokes.

One of most important upset happened at the 2016 Rio Olympics during the pole vault event. 22-year-old Brazilian Thiago da Silva beat the defending champion in a thrilling contest. He became a national hero in Brazil after upstaging favorite and world record holder (6.16m) Renaud Lavillenie. The heckling was so intense that when Olympic champion Lavillenie prepared for his last attempt to hold on to his 2012 title, he lost his concentration: The hostile atmosphere clearly unsettled the Frenchman, who gave fans the thumbs-down sign between attempts. This loss of concentration and wrong focus costed him also his gold too when he failed at 6.08 meters, allowing da Silva's 6.03 Olympic record to stand. The Frenchman had no answer.

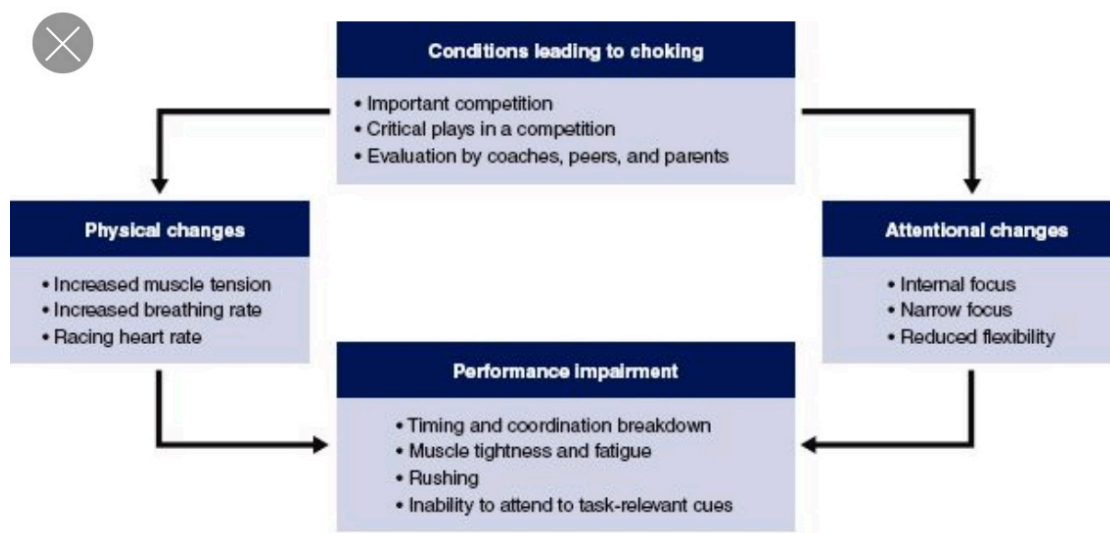


**Photo.** Renaud Lavillenie after he placed second in the men's pole vault final during the Rio 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, August 15, 2016. (AFP/Adrian Dennis).

## CHOKING UNDER PRESSURE

So what happened to Greg Norman and Renaud Lavillenie when everything was going great and it was just a question to finish, to close the competition? They choked. Choking is a popular word for having a game locked up and giving it away in the most crucial moment. It's a popular word because it happens a lot and not only to the best athletes. Every athlete will meet one or several performance issues like choking and feeling the pressure to perform with the recurrent negatives thoughts. And it may happen to you if you do nothing to prevent this powerful negative spiral.

Here's a common scenario you might have already experienced. You are about to play in your first school championship table tennis. Your inexperience and the importance of this championship game are already combining to make you feel nervous when the coach adds to the pressure by saying your win is they key to the team's success. Furthermore, you know that your friends and your family will be coming out to watch you play. During the game you feel muscle tension in your neck and shoulders, where stress usually hits you. Your heart is racing and your breathing is shallow. You feel rushed, as if things are happening too fast around you. This feeling might be why you feel overanxious and miss easy shots. Your attention is also affected, your concentration becomes narrow and internally focused. You are distracted by your own thoughts and feelings and have trouble concentrating on the match. Your thoughts instead become focused on not messing up, not losing and "not disappointing your teammates, coach, family and friends. Your state, both psychologically and physically is naturally leading to make more errors. When the match gets tight, instead making good contact with the ball, you have bad timing and hit the ball out. This makes you even more frustrated and you start to think of your technique as you are playing. Then, this extra attention on your execution breaks down the movement that has been automated and practiced over and over. What was once automatic is now being performed through conscious thought process – but the skill is best performed without conscious thought processes. You are overthinking and overanalyzing your technique. You're in the middle of a choking episode!



**Figure:** choking process – from Weinberg and Gould, *Foundations of Exercise and Sport Psychology, Human Kinetics, 2011.*

Choking is much more than your behavior during performance. Missing a forehand, a free throw, a golf putt or to lose a game doesn't necessarily mean you choked. What is important is to know why and how you missed or failed. Let's take a look at the process of what is called 'choking'. In general, we say athletes are choking when their performance progressively deteriorates and they cannot regain control. In order to remain mentally tough under pressure you need to be able to recognize the first sign of tension and distractions that could lead to underperform. In general, we say athletes are choking when their performance progressively deteriorates and they cannot regain control. Professor Robert Weinberg, from the Department of Psychology and Health from Miami University and expert in mental training and sport performance explains the choking process (shown in figure): *"Sensing pressure causes your muscles to tighten. Your heart rate and breathing increase; your mouth gets dry, and your palms get damp. But the key breakdown occurs at the attentional level: instead of focusing externally on the relevant cues in your environment (e.g., the ball, the other player, ... etc.), you focus on your own worries and fear of losing and failing, as your attention becomes narrow and internal. At the same time, the increased pressure reduces your flexibility to shift your attention: you have problems changing your focus. Impaired timing and coordination, fatigue, muscle tension, and poor decision making soon follow."* Now, we know the dangers to avoid in competition – but how to avoid choking under pressure when it matters the most?

## MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING

Choking usually occurs in a situation of emotional importance to the athlete. Emotions is what makes our reaction to the pressure so strong and what strongly imprints our memory. You cannot really avoid having emotions about the situation, however you can build mental resources that will act as a shield against the negativity thoughts that could trigger the downward spiral of choking.

All elite athletes know that mental toughness is critical to their future success. In fact, it's critical for any athlete and any performance. Research clearly shows that mental training is necessary for consistent peak performance (the vast majority of Olympics athletes have a mental training program) and to cope with stress and pressure in competition.

The sport commentators are usually quick to credit the *natural* mental toughness of certain athletes, as if it is something you have by nature or not. However, more than 30 years' research clearly shows that mental skills are built and successful athletes, through comprehensive mental training programs create the optimum condition to perform at their best when the stakes are high. To create customized mental training programs for athletes is precisely what does Dr. Robert Neff, founder and president of Mental Training, Inc. (USA). After more than 25 years working with the best athletes in the world, Dr. Neff and his team of mental trainers know that performance anxiety is the most common problem experienced by athletes: *"The athlete feels anxiety as the competition is approaching, or during specific times during the competition, that produces mistakes and errors in judgment. Mental skills have been developed specifically for this*

*condition. Calm, confident and carefree are words used by athletes to describe how it feels during periods of high performance. The 'zone' is the opposite of performance anxiety and can be controlled by any athlete who has the discipline to learn and practice mental skills."* What's important here is that mental skills can be learned and controlled. So the next stage is to know what to do to build mental strength. Here's what you need to know to start using your mind better in competition and maybe enter the zone of peak performance.

## FIVE STEPS TO BUILD MENTAL STRENGTH

Most of the mental training programs currently used by the best athletes are built on five steps leading to strong mental skills necessary to perform at their best when it matters the most. Surprisingly, Step One has – apparently – nothing to do with mental training: it is to develop an efficient technique. Indeed, no matter the sport, strong mental skills always start with a strong work ethic and smart coaching, especially to master the technique fundamentals. It is during this stage, which could be quite long, and often happens at a young age, that the athletes learn to focus, learn resilience and build self-confidence. In fact, the mind is deeply involved in this stage because it's when the athletes develop their body awareness and concentration while learning new movements.

Then, Step Two is about fitness and health. To function at your best, you need a healthy and strong body. If you get fatigued, injured or sick, staying mentally strong becomes very difficult. The goal here is to develop the physical skills specific to your sport.

Step Three is the core of any mental training program. Once you can rely on the technical and physical foundations, it's time to learn and develop, every day, the most important mental skills: relaxation, mindfulness and visualization (also called mental imagery). All the other skills you will need along the way to success depend on those three core mental skills.

Step Four is about learning to control the mental states leading to optimal performance. Top performers know how to change their thoughts and their attention to stay motivated, and get calm, confident, relaxed and carefree. As underlined by Dr. Neff, this stage definitively needs training: *"Mental strength training involves learning and practicing mental skills that strengthen the ability to control thoughts, emotions and performance. As an example, if there are certain thoughts that tend to cause nervousness, an experienced athlete will know what those thoughts are, be able to recognize them during competition, be able to get those thoughts out of the mind, and then insert the proper thoughts. The result is an emotion more ideally suited to optimal performance."*

Finally Step Five is about feedbacks, adjustment and persistence. You need to test your mental skills in a context close to your future competition so you can learn which area needs more work. Let's take a closer look at the essential mental states to perform at your best when it matters the most.

## SAFETY: THE GROUND FOR A STRONG MIND

Before doing anything about your mental skills you must address something underrated until very recently. One of the main finding of neuroscience is that the primary function of the brain is to keep us safe. In sport, many things could be treated as potential threats by your nervous system: the pressure you put on yourself to win, the pressure from your parents, the expectation

to attain a certain ranking, or people watching you. Everything you do, from training to competition should reinforce your sense of safety to reduce your perceived pressure and threats. Here the coach plays an important role creating and protecting this safe place for the athlete. Safe to fail, safe to be vulnerable during the phase of learning, trials and errors; safe to doubt, to question and ask for help – this place is priceless and the responsibility of the coach too often underestimated. So if you are a parent, check with your child if he or she feels psychologically and emotionally safe. If you practice and perform a sport you love, it must be part of your growth and well being, bringing development and happiness not stress and anxiety.

## FIRST ACTION: HAVE A PLAN

The first action to take is to create a plan with the different steps leading to your ultimate dream. It's important here to carry yourself during training or competition "as if" you were this professional player you want to become; "as if" you were already this champion, or this medalist. The idea is to create and cultivate the feeling of what you really want the most. It really helps to have clarity about what it takes to reach your dream and what are the potential roadblocks you could meet along the way. Then, you set your short-term goals. Cutting the process in little, feasible steps really helps to change your beliefs about what you can or can't do, renew your energy and increase your determination. This plan is the best way to focus only on what you want, and to leave no room for fear or frustration. The idea is to keep your mind busy on what you need to do, now. As you have now a clear vision of where you want to go, the next step is to keep your motivation high.

## MOTIVATED AND POSITIVE

No matter how detailed and good is your plan, as everybody, you will experience ups and downs, exciting progress and discouraging plateaus. During these tough moments, you must stay strong, focused. But how to stay relaxed when you come back from injury and struggle to find your best level? Decades of research in positive psychology have brought strong evidence for the power of positive thinking. Using encouraging words helps us to keep going during difficult times. It helps us continue believing in our abilities. Too often the focus is on what's wrong, what needs to be fixed, and not on what the athlete really wants. To keep the motivation high, the role of the coach is essential. He's the one who creates and maintain a psychologically safe environment and keeps the athlete's self-talk on the positive side. Coaches must be aware of their huge impact.

## POSITIVE IMPACT

Beyond words, the coach positivity literally changes the athlete's physiology. Recent research shows that positive emotions like love, support or care create a state called coherence where brain and heart function in an optimum way. This harmony between mind and body is not only good for the coach himself, but also for the well being of the athlete: when the coach is in a coherence state, both the coach's and athlete's brainwaves and heart get in sync. That's the coach's positive impact. Thus, the athlete's body and energy are directly influenced by the coach's thought, beliefs and intentions. The point to remember here is the main role played by

intentions. Genuine and supportive intentions are the key for the athletes to feel safe, learn faster and perform at their best.

## MORE POSITIVE

To adopt and cultivate a more positive mindset, you need to notice and reinforce every little positive actions, events and experiences in your life. The more you take a little more time to take in the positive, the more connections you create in the part of your brain dedicated to take perspective, to see the big picture and not just react instinctively. Neuroscience has showed that our brain has natural bias to notice more the negative but you can overcome this bad habit by consciously noticing the positive. By literally rewiring your brain for the positive, you will respond to challenging situations in a more positive and calm way.

## CALM AND RELAXED

Any coach having worked with elite athletes would say that of all their mental skills, perhaps the most important is their ability to stay calm and relaxed under pressure. Staying relaxed under those conditions rarely happens naturally, it must be practiced. Relaxation is designed to help you relax your muscles so you'll be able to find the right muscle tension during competition. Relaxation should be practiced 3 or 4 times per week minimum for several weeks before consistent control is attained. No matter if it is cognitive (using your mind and thoughts to relax) or progressive relaxation (using your body), in order for them to work you have to practice them daily for several months. In the progressive relaxation you are tensing and relaxing various parts of your body, developing your body awareness. In the cognitive relaxation, you use your mind to bring the relaxed state, recalling a pleasant and relaxing experience for instance.

## FROM NARROW FOCUS TO WHOLE FOCUS

But there is another very efficient and new way to relax: to change your attention. Under stress we all tend to sink in a narrow focus type of attention which is usually the first sign of choking. Research has showed that narrow attention creates tension in your body. The solution is to expand your attention, to get into an open focus. The simple act of putting your attention on space will make you brainwaves shift instantly from beta (active, busy brain) to alpha (relaxed brain). Then, it's all your body following this wave of alpha getting you into a relaxed state. This discovery by a researcher from Princeton is now at the core of a new process of mental training called "whole focus" drawing on 40-years research and currently developed in Australia. With the help of neurofeedback (brainwaves monitoring) and biofeedback (in particular the heart rate variation) "whole focus" is designed to help the athletes to expand their attention, therefore relax and enter the flow state synonymous of optimal functioning both for mind and body.

## VISUALIZATION

A relaxed and calm state is the best condition to use visualization. During the Olympics or other world championships you often see some athletes with their eyes closed prior competing. They are using visualization. Visualization is a critical skill to develop and integrate into training and competition. In the learning phase, it will help you to learn faster. Visualizing exactly the

movements or key sequences of your sport in your mind will reinforce the neural pathways associated to your movements and make them automatic. Visualization is more effective when done in first person (from your own perspective) because it enhances the kinesthetic response (body awareness). You can also use visualization to see yourself performing something that did not work well for you. Simply recreating the same situation in your mind but with a positive outcome will change the emotions associated to similar events and will change how you respond to a similar event. No matter why you use visualization, what's important is to commit to a program. Being patient is the key. Remember visualization works and has worked for countless sports champions. Start simple, five to ten minutes a day with short visualizations of your favorite sequences in your sport or the one you want to improve. Then, use your imagination. Do more than just seeing. Try to feel and to associate what you see with strong positive emotions and feelings. The secret is in the feeling, that's how visualization can also help you to reach your goals.

## THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS

When you experience frustration in your sport, instantly come up negative thoughts with the same consequences: nervousness, worry, frustration, anger and sometimes choking. Because your mind and body always work together, you will also feel tight, then conservative and over careful. The good news is that you can change these emotions and feel better. What is the solution? Fortunately, it is the same solution regardless of the type of emotion. The solution is first to recognize what's going on. To recognize your thoughts and emotions you need to develop your thought awareness. Thought awareness, also called mindfulness, simply means to identify what type of thoughts are limiting your performance. Mindfulness, very popular at the moment, is really about being able to have more perspective and not being caught in past or future worries, mistakes or outcome. As soon as you recognize the situation and your thoughts, you become present again. Being back to the present, you get your power back to control and change the way you are responding to the situation.

## BODY AWARENESS

To stay fully present, mindfulness is not enough, you must develop your body awareness. Your body can also help you to be immersed in the action. Being more into your movement, into your sensations has two major effects. The first one is to help you to learn new motor skill faster and to install the new movement in your long term memory. The second effect is to keep you in the present. When you are immersed in your sensation, you are in the now, exactly what you want during competition.

## BELIEFS AND SUBCONSCIOUS MIND

The tricky part here is that the way you respond to the stressful situation is driven by your past experiences, good or bad, and your beliefs. To change your beliefs about yourself and what you can or can't do, you need to access your subconscious mind. What you truly believe about yourself is anchored in beyond your conscious awareness. This hidden edifice of experiences is driving more than 95 percent of your everyday behaviors, and sport makes no exception. So the

first thing to do is to write down the list of your beliefs about yourself, your skills and abilities. Then, for each of them, you have to honestly ask yourself if it's just a feeling, a construction or an actual fact. Noticing some of your limiting beliefs will help to make them dissolve before all the good you are going to experience and create. Then there are different techniques to help uncovering the hidden blocks in the subconscious: EMDR, tapping, hypnosis – which one to choose is just a question of personal preference.

## THE KEY TO MENTAL TRAINING: ACCOUNTABILITY

It's great to learn new technique to develop a strong mind, but the most important is to stick on them and practice over and over again. The key to mental training is accountability. Remember, mental skills must be practiced and developed, just like the technical or physical aspects of your sport. You can learn the hard way, through trials and errors, experience long plateaus and frustration. Or you can start to develop your mental skills. Mental toughness is all about persistence. So, start small with relaxation and short visualization, learn to change your attention, believe in yourself and no doubt you will enter the flow and perhaps have a taste of this elusive zone displayed by the greatest champions.