



DEVELOPING MENTAL SKILLS IN ATHLETES

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Throughout their careers, athletes will spend hours upon hours in the weight room or on a field to improve physical skills. However, many coaches and athletes admit that the mental side can aid performance just as much as the physical. It has been said that there are several mental skills shared by elite-level athletes that contribute to success. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide recommendations for developing mental skills in athletes.

From the time a child is born until six years of age, the goal for all strength and conditioning professionals is to develop a positive attitude toward sport and physical activity (5). This can be done by playing games that take advantage of a child's creative imagination. An example could be using balloons to teach kids various skills, such as kicking or throwing. Associating fun with physical activity at youth ages can be an effective strategy for increasing physical activity (7,9). Developing a positive attitude in the young athletes is also recommended. Research has shown that a positive attitude will help the athlete enjoy sport and can lead to more success (5). Strength and conditioning professionals should communicate positive messages, such as "you can do it" or "get back up when you fall," to athletes during practice. These messages help create a fun sport experience where success means giving the best effort possible (5). The foundation for mental skills training is set during this age.

By the time children are around the age of 6 - 9, strength and conditioning professionals should consider introducing basic

mental skill in fun and creative ways (1). Children at this age want to have fun with their friends. Imaginary activities and games like capture the flag can give athletes a sample of goal setting and communication while treating kids as kids (1). Strength and conditioning professionals should incorporate a variety of sports and games for the athlete to get out of their comfort zone and try new skills. Other key points for strength and conditioning professionals to consider at this stage include: 1) celebrating the effort an athlete gives, rather than winning or losing, for self-esteem development; 2) creating an environment in which youth want to participate; and 3) introducing basic rules and ethics in sport to further develop decision making and social skills (5).

The intensity of mental skills training can increase when children are around age 8 - 12. Athletes at this age get a more in-depth look at mental skills. Basic mental skills are introduced to complement physical training (5). At this stage, strength and conditioning professionals and athletes should view mistakes as learning opportunities (5). They should be able to understand the purpose and read books related to mental skills training. During this time, the strength and conditioning professional should focus on goal setting, relaxation techniques, imagery, concentration, communication, and motivation (1). Strength and conditioning professionals can explain long-term versus short-term goals, which can give athletes a direction and purpose for training. Imagery, also known as mental rehearsal, allows athletes to use all five senses to practice a situation in their mind (8). Research has shown that imagery can improve performance as

well as concentration, motivation, and relaxation in children (8). Additionally, research suggests that simple breathing exercises can go a long way for athletes to handle pressure (8).

The next step for developing mental skills occurs at 12 – 16 years of age (1). At this stage, strength and conditioning professionals should focus on learning and applying mental skills, such as goal setting and breathing exercises to game situations. The goal is to build on the mental skills learned at a younger age. Goal setting can now be broken into short-, medium-, and long-term goals (1). Progressive muscle relaxation (contracting and relaxing individual muscle group) and breathing exercises can be utilized along with self-talk and thought stopping (1). Self-talk can be defined as talking to one's self just like one would talk to their best friend (4). An example of positive self-talk includes getting ready for a job interview and staring in the mirror while telling yourself "I'm ready" or "I can do this." Athletes should practice stopping any negative thoughts and turn them into positive self-talk, if possible (1). Research suggests that these mental skills can develop body awareness and teach athletes how to release muscle tension (2).

Another mental skill athletes can work on is concentration. At this level, loud crowd noise, trash talk from opponents, and the pressure to perform can distract an athlete. Researchers have suggested using cue words to refocus and maintain concentration (1). All strength and conditioning professionals and coaches should understand the physical and mental stress that athletes face in training and competition. For this reason, it is important to begin monitoring mental fatigue (5). Mental fatigue is caused by long periods of demanding cognitive activity (6). Strength and conditioning professionals should know the warning signs of mental fatigue and refer an athlete to a medical professional, if needed.

The last step in the process occurs around the age of 15 – 23 (5). The goal at this stage is to develop consistency using the mental skills already learned (1). Imagery, focus, and stress management are all important. Pressure and distractions are easy to come by at the high school and college level of sport. A competition preparation routine during practice or training to maintain focus when things go wrong can be an effective strategy (1,5). Additionally, equipment malfunctions and weather delays can happen from time to time, so it is important to have a plan to refocus. Strength and conditioning professionals should understand the difficult balance between sport and life, especially at higher levels of sport. Increased training volume, school, and other demands in life can make an athlete feel like they are drowning. Reemphasizing fun to promote a healthy sport-life balance is recommended (5). To that end, strength and conditioning professionals should also encourage the athlete to pursue his or her other goals outside of sport, as appropriate.

Strength and conditioning professionals should consider mental skills training when creating a training program to maximize performance. Developing mental skills is a very long and challenging process but, the benefits are worth it. Utilizing

these skills will put the athlete in a position to succeed in sport, as well as life.

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