

Mental Readiness

Minding your Ps and "Cues"

by Mick G. Mack

Successful coaches and athletes know that being mentally prepared is an essential part of performing well. Asking them how they get mentally ready to compete usually results in a broad variety of answers. However, many of them are misinformed and misguided in their attempts to get mentally ready to compete. The reason is often quite simple. As children, we learned how to conduct ourselves and how to behave in various situations. With the proper education and training, we learned to mind our Ps and Qs. Successfully competing in athletics requires a similar educational process, and athletes must learn to mind their Ps and "Cues" in order to attain an optimal state of mind.

Being mentally ready to compete involves a minimum of two types of skills-the Ps and the Cues. The Ps (preparation, positive attitude, and perception) are broad skills which provide a foundation for achieving long-term goals. Broad skills are essential to the ongoing training required to become a successful athlete. Conversely, Cues (centering, concentration, and control) are short-term skills specific to performing. The performance cues are critical during actual competition. While the Ps and Cues are different in nature, each should be taught and developed through regular instruction and practice.

Preparation

The foundation of confidence and trust in one's self comes directly from proper physical and mental preparation. Taylor (1993) expresses this concept as the performance funnel, in which all mental, physical, and equipment preparation flows down to emerge as quality performance. Athletes need to enter competition knowing that they deserve to perform well. The secret to success and building confidence is the grueling, boring, dirty and often painful work done in practice (Goldberg, 1998). Through all the training, sweat, mental preparation, diet, etc., athletes develop selfconfidence and the belief that they have earned the right to perform well. Earning that right also relieves the pressure of having to win or hoping to perform well. By preparing, athletes also establish a clear plan as to what they are trying to accomplish. A plan of action removes the ambiguity of expectations that in turn increases self-confidence. The athlete knows what is expected and simply needs to perform as practiced.

Positive Attitude

Successful athletes realize that attitude is a choice, so choose to have a positive attitude (Lesyk, 1998). Athletes usually get what they expect, so that if they expect to perform poorly they probably will. If they go in anticipating they will have fun and perform their best, chances are they will. Athletes with a positive attitude see sport as an opportunity to compete and learn from their experiences, and this allows them to take chances in pursuit of excellence. Maintaining a positive attitude provides athletes the opportunity to constantly test the limits of their ability as they strive to improve.

Perception

Prior to competing, elite and nonelite athletes feel the same types and degrees of anxiety. Both groups experience a physiological state of readiness resulting in increased heart rate, muscle tension, sweating, and more rapid breathing. The major difference between elite and non-elite performers is how they perceive these changes. Elite athletes are much more likely to interpret a physiological state of readiness as being facilitative to performance (Jones & Swain, 1995). In other words, elite performers perceive the changes as helpful while less-experienced performers perceive them as being harmful. Successful athletes have learned that some degree of anxiety and nervousness is actually beneficial to performance. Thus, athletes should learn to perceive their anxiety and physiological reactions as positive, and use the added boost of adrenaline to their advantage.

Centering

To perform well, athletes must have a sense of control, balance, and relaxation. A quick and effective technique for attaining this state is centering. Centering involves breathing deeply and slowly with knees slightly bent, while focusing attention on the abdomen (Kremer & Scully, 1994). Taking a deep breath has a relaxing, calming effect. Bending the knees provides a comfortable feeling that body weight is distributed correctly for the required performance situation, and counteracts the natural tendency to lock knees when over-aroused. Focusing on the

center of gravity increases a sense of balance and control while simultaneously disrupting any negative thoughts. With minimal practice, a couple of short breaths and redirected attention should result in a calming sense of balance and control one can use at critical competitive moments.

Concentration

Concentration is one of the most important keys to effective sport performance (Nideffer & Sagal, 2001). The ability to focus on essential cues while blocking out distractions is critical. However, controlling and maintaining concentration for the duration of competition is often difficult. Fatigue, self-criticism, noise, competitive conditions and not focusing on the moment are common distractions athletes must learn to block. Athletes must be taught which cues are important and which should be ignored. Essential cues are called performance cues. For example, a batter needs to concentrate on reading the ball rotation and ignoring a pitcher's follow-through. A diver's performance cues may involve words such as "Relax, spot, spot, kick, spot," that encourages concentration and focus on executing the dive. Once identified, concentration cues and skills should be practiced under increasingly more difficult and stressful situations. Anxious athletes have a natural tendency to lose focus, so developing and practicing the ability to concentrate on critical performance cues provides them with a way of eliminating potential distractions. In addition, concentrating on performance cues helps them to quickly regain focus and prevent the choking process before performance deteriorates.

Control

Another cue for performing successfully is to maintain control of anxiety and emotion. Every athlete has an ideal level of anxiety and emotion in which optimal performance is most likely to occur. Having too much anxiety is detrimental to performance as is too little (Sonstroem & Bernardo, 1982). The secret is to know the optimal level and then learn to adjust accordingly. When anxiety levels are too low, some type of psych-up method should be used. When too high, a relaxation technique is beneficial. All athletes should perfect at least one technique for reducing and one for increasing anxiety levels. They must also learn to control their emotions in order to improve levels of performance. Emotions such as fear, excitement, and anger are part of the competitive experience and can be used to advantage; learning how to control them is critical in the development of successful performance.

Implications for Players and Coaches

Learning the Ps and Cues of mental readiness is an essential part of championship athletic performance. Preparation, positive attitude, and perception form the basis for long-term development. These skills provide the basis for continued learning and development. Centering, concentration, and control help ensure proper execution and increase the likelihood of getting into and remaining in the zone for optimal performance while competing. However, as with other skills, becoming proficient in mental readiness requires training and practice. Coaches and athletes will need to integrate the Ps and Cues of performance enhancement into their current training regiment. The guidelines below encourage development of those mental skills required for maximal athletic performance:

- Reexamine your complete training program Evaluate the specific mental, physical, nutritional, and equipment readiness of your sport. Are you strong enough and is your technique solid? Do you control your emotions? Does your game plan capitalize on your strengths? Make sure that your training regiment is complete so that you enter competition knowing you are totally prepared and have earned the right to perform well.
- Dress rehearsal Get used to performing in uniform under competitive conditions. This is especially important after mastering a new skill, implementing a different technique, or clearing a new height. You can also use imagery to see yourself performing well. Try to hear the crowd, feel the water, and sense the excitement. Overtrain by practicing worst-case scenarios such as a wet ball, cold pool, last attempt, hostile crowd, or longer than normal time-out. Proper preparation should include practicing under conditions that simulate the actual competitive experience.
- Read books and articles about successful people. Study their habits and beliefs to find out what makes them tick. Notice how successful people, when faced with setbacks or defeat, maintain a positive attitude and use that to soar to even greater heights. Surround yourself with supportive people. Reinforcement, positive feedback, and verbal persuasion are all effective sources of sport confidence.
- Keep a performance notebook. Record at least one good thing you did in practice or competition on that day;

record at least one good thing you did outside of athletics. Work on improving your perception of success by recording the positive things you accomplish, your improvements, and your personal goals.

- Establish a precompetition routine. Develop a routine that you consistently follow before competition. Routine channels the mind away from distractions so that you can focus on the upcoming competition. Precompetition routines also increase feelings of control, raise your level of intensity, and serve as a countdown to performing.
- Compare a past performance that you rate as peak to one that is poor. Identify the physiological symptoms you experienced for each. What did the butterflies feel like? Were your muscles tense? Did you sweat a lot? Next, compare your thoughts and self-talk before the different performances. Were you eager with anticipation? Did you interpret your physiological feelings positively or negatively? By becoming aware that your thoughts and feelings are affecting your performance, you can start to control them.
- Practice the centering technique. Close your eyes and focus attention on the center of your abdomen. Take a deep breath with your knees slightly bent. Feel the sense of balance and control. Practice using this technique to help you refocus and stay relaxed. Do deep breathing exercises. Practice taking deep breaths and letting them out slowly. Inhale through the nose for a four count, hold for a four count, and exhale through the mouth with a slight sigh for a four count. Concentrate on breathing. Learn to associate a deep breath with being relaxed.
- Identify performance cues. Identify the specific cues that you should be concentrating on. For example, in the sprint start to concentrate on the sound of the gun or your arm exploding upwards. When receiving a serve, focus on the ball or the server's racket, shoulder, and the ball. Once the cues are identified, practice focusing on them under increasingly extreme conditions in order to learn to block out distractions. Practice controlling your focus of attention. At different times, interrupt what you are doing and focus on something different. For example, shut your eyes during a commercial break and count the number of breaths you take. Interrupt practice and focus on the ball for 30 seconds. If your mind wanders, stop yourself and refocus. Next, practice shifting your attention from one set of cues to another using different focus styles. For example, a soccer player should practice using a broad attentional focus when reading the defense while dribbling. Once in the clear and ready to shoot, attention should be shifted to a very narrow focus on the ball.
- Identify optimal arousal level. Reflect on your best and worst performances. Think about the level of anxiety and intensity of emotion you experienced prior to each competition. Note the differences in anxiety and emotion. Use your best performance as a guide to your optimal anxiety and emotional levels. Focus on recreating these levels for upcoming competitions. Develop different arousal adjustment techniques. Develop and practice a relaxation technique that is effective for you (deep breathing, imagery, listening to music, progressive relaxation, centering, meditation, etc.). Next, develop and practice a technique that you can use to pump yourself up (positive self-talk, physical exercise, bracing, music, emotional energy, verbal cues, etc.). Find what is effective and what you feel confident in. Use to maintain your optimal arousal level.