

Are You Training Your Mental Game or Just Thinking About it?

by Dr. Julie Ness

After years of training in sport psychology, I began working with individual athletes and teams on the mental side of their game. My efforts focus on helping athletes learn how to use their minds to help, rather than hurt, performance. Each session typically includes a "homework" assignment—one or more mental exercises the athletes are to complete before we meet again. As we review their homework in the next session, a curious pattern often begins to emerge. Almost every athlete will affirm that they did the assignment. However, few can really describe in detail what they accomplished. My conclusion is that many of these athletes are not really practicing mental training—they are simply thinking about mental training. They know that the mental side of their game is important, but they don't have the tools, experience or structure to actually make it happen.

Writing down your thoughts in an organized, systematic way, you are actively training your mind. And when you train your mind, you can develop a habit of mental toughness.

This process of carefully recording your thoughts (or "journaling") after a practice session will help you:

- ignore distractions
- lengthen your attention span
- improve your focusing skills
- keep you accountable

Each daily entry should include three parts. First, you warm up your mind. Just as you need to warm up your body before practice, you need to warm up your mind before mental training. This warm up period is simply a time to "free-write." Stretch your mind by jotting down any thoughts that occur to you—whatever may be on your mind at the time. For example, "I feel excited to do bars today. I hope I make my Stalder."

Next, you write specifically about the successes in that day's practice. For example, "I really got the hang of my Yurchenko today. I made all my attempts with no problems." Some days, your accomplishments might be limited. Other days, they may be stunning. Either way, you need to write down the positive results. This step is crucial because you have to develop the habit of remembering what you do right—you might say, remembering the reality of your talent. After all, when a pressure situation arises in competition, you will either trust your talent...or trust your doubt. This step in the journaling process helps train the mind so that your natural reaction in those situations will be to remember and trust your talent.

The third step is to begin thinking-correctly-about your mistakes. The goal is to move your mind from "what I did wrong" to "what I need to do to correct this mistake." After you identify and write down the required correction, you next write about the experience you will have the next time. What does it look like when you make the correction? For example, "I need to twist later on my double full. I'm whipping my head back and twisting too early. Next time I will set first and then twist."

Based on the theory that it takes 28 experiences to create a habit, spend ten minutes with your journal after each practice for 28 practices and you can create a habit of mental toughness.

By the time you have completed the journal, you should see several tangible results. Specifically, you will:

- Understand the difference between thinking and mental training and actually doing mental training.
- Have a habit of turning mistakes into corrections and remaining focused on the correction.
- Be able to choose confidence at any time.

Do you ever practice better than you perform? Have you ever sensed that some of your mistakes were more mental than physical? Do you think you could improve your performance by improving your mental toughness?

Remember, only when you have the mind of a champion can your physical skills really shine to their maximum potential. Begin to train your mind for success!

Dr. Julie Ness received her Ph.D. in sport psychology from the University of Virginia. She was a competitive gymnast, diver, and cheerleader and also has an extensive coaching background. In her field of sport psychology, she has worked with athletes in a variety of team and individual sports, including baseball, basketball, football, gymnastics, golf, cheerleading, hockey, tennis, and soccer. For more information on Dr. Ness' ideas, read Play to Win...The Journal to Keep You a Step Ahead which is available from Source Publications (1-800-477-6698).

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