



Get **Psyched!**

5 Steps to Mentally Prepare for Competition

**It's very simple.
You compete how you train.
If you train well,
you compete well.
It's not about who's lucky,
It's about who's prepared.**

It's that time of year again. Time to tighten up your grips, put that first half with the second half, stick those dismounts, and get ready to shine! It's meet season. This article will give you five basic steps to get your mind ready for competition. These exercises will help you tighten your mind to perform your best!

Step #1: Creating the Vision

It's very important you create the vision of the gymnast you want to be in competition. This is your goal when you are getting ready to compete. What do you look like? How are you acting in the gym? What do you do on a good day? A bad day? How focused and aggressive are you during workout and competitions? I call this your "Vision" with a capital "V." It is your perfect image of how you want to compete. Here are some examples or words other gymnasts have used to describe their vision: motivated, fun, aggressive, doubtless, positive, confident, and consistent. Everything in the world starts with a vision. Remind yourself of your vision every day.

Exercise: Creating the Vision

On a piece of paper, write as many words as you can that describe your ideal vision for competition. Hang this list up in your room or locker to remind yourself of the gymnast you want to be every day!

Step #2: Mental Choreography

It's important you are saying words to yourself throughout all of your routines. The words you say in your head are your Mental Choreography. Remember, out of control thinking leads to out of control performance. Mental choreography is your key to confident, consistent routines. When you use cue words throughout your routines, your mind stays focused leaving no room for negative thoughts. It is just as important to

choreograph thoughts as it is to choreograph a floor or beam routine. We know that the biggest cause of negative performance or balking is out of control thinking. You need disciplined thoughts to increase consistency and concentration.

Constructing positive mental choreography is one of the first things you can do to create mental toughness. There are three types of thoughts that you want to use in mental choreography. The three types are

Mechanical Statements—reminds you of technique (lift chest, heel drive, etc.)

Energy Statements—pumps you up or relaxes you (go, push, relax, etc.)

Self-Esteem Statements—helps with confidence. (I can do it, this is easy, etc.)

Use these statements to choreograph your routines and individual tricks as well.

Exercise: Mental Choreography

On a big piece of paper, write out each of your routines. For floor and beam, draw your pattern and write the skills you are doing on the pattern line. Then, above the line, write out every thought you want to be thinking during your routine. For uneven bars, parallel bars, high bar, rings, and pommel horse, write a list of your skills and the thoughts you want to be thinking on each skill. For vault, write what you are thinking before you run, during your run, and during your vault. You may not have mental choreography during every skill. Practice your mental choreography by doing mental "walk throughs" until it comes automatically.

Step #3: Mental Rehearsal Schedule

Consistent visualization is an important part of any mental toughness-training program. Visualizing yourself doing perfect routines helps build confidence and consistency. The most important by-product of mental rehearsal is the pairing of cue words (Mental Choreography) to perfect performance. When you do mental rehearsal, it's important to see yourself with as much detail as possible. Try to use all five senses. The closer you can simulate competition in your mind, the more you will be mentally prepared.

A mental rehearsal schedule can be done at any time during the day, although most find it more helpful before they go to bed at night.

Exercise: Mental Rehearsal Schedule

Write each day of the week on a piece of paper and create your mental rehearsal schedule. Include some skills and some routines. Be sure to give yourself at least one night off. The night before a competition visualize each of your routines with all the mental choreography included. Don't give yourself too many routines. Make your mental rehearsal schedule realistic, if you can only do one before you fall asleep, that's fine!

Step #4: One-Point Training

The "One-Point" is my term for a state of mental focus without distraction. It is simply being in the present, without dwelling in the past (what happened) or future (what if). Learning to control your



mind and pull it back when it gets off track is a skill. Learn how to bring your mind back to "one point" first by identifying what your one point feels like. What do you feel like when you are totally doubtless in competition? Visualize yourself on your one-point. Then, practice bringing yourself back to one-point whenever you lose focus. Bring yourself back with a word and a breath. This is called your "one-point anchor." It is the cue that brings your mind back to focus whenever you feel distracted, frustrated, nervous, or upset. Practice getting back to one-point by visualizing a bad day, and see yourself turn it around in your mind by changing your thinking. Practice turning negative thoughts around in workout. This will train your mind to change negative thoughts before competition.

Exercise: The One-Point

Create your one-point anchor. It could be as simple as a breath and a phrase. For example, "Stop, breathe, make it happen" or "Breathe, relax, back to one-point." Practice this in the gym whenever you feel out of your zone.

Step #5: Pre-Competition Rituals

It is crucial you are mentally focused just prior to competition. Too many times fear, stress, and pressure shake up your confidence right before the judge raises his or her hand. Your goal is to get yourself into your Ideal Vision State (which means you feel confident, focused, excited, and ready to hit your routines). Your pre-competition ritual is what you are saying and doing as you prepare to compete. It's important to



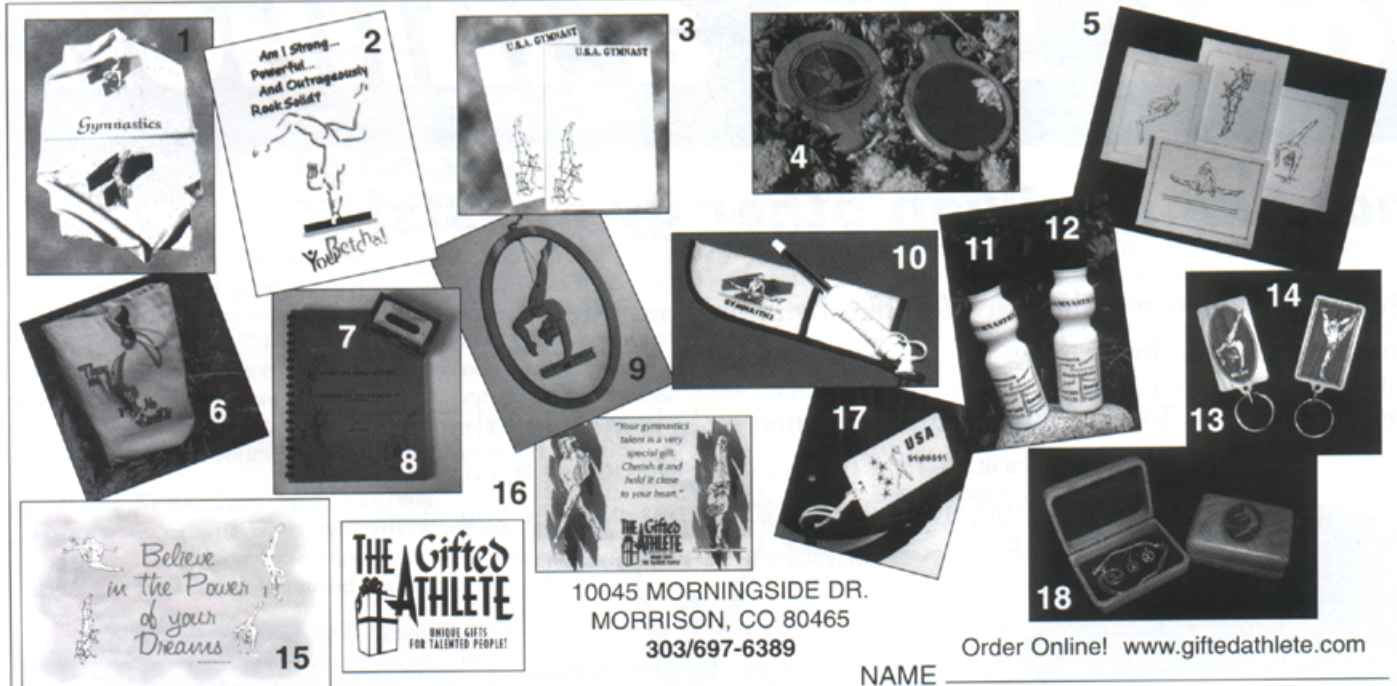
choreograph two people before you compete, one person before you compete, while you are waiting for the judge, and right before you start your routine. Elements in your pre-competition ritual could include visualization, positive self-talk, and breathing. Practice your pre-competition ritual in workout at least one week before the meet.

Exercise: Pre-Competition Ritual

On a piece of paper, write out your pre-competition ritual for every event. Be sure to include two people before you compete, one person before you compete, while you are waiting for the judge, and before you start your routine.

These tools will help you feel confident and train your mind to compete your best. Remember, the key on competition day is letting go and having fun. On the day of the meet, know you have prepared as much as you can and go into the meet with confidence and excitement. You've worked hard, now is the time to make it happen. Good luck, and most importantly, have fun.

Dr. Alison Arnold is a sport psychology consultant to USA Gymnastics. Her 26 Week Mental Toughness Training Workbook has been used by athletes all over the country from Level 4 to International Elite. Her new Visualization Audio CD leads the athlete through three mental adventures designed to increase confidence, decrease fear, and mentally prepare for competition. If you have questions or would like to order a workbook, video, or CD contact her at www.headgames.ws or DocAlison@aol.com.



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