

The 5 Rings of Mental Toughness

By Alison Arnold Ph.D.

The Olympic rings are symbols of strength, dedication, and commitment. In the beginning of 2004, I wanted to create a mental training program that would not only help gymnasts reach their goals, but would also tie in to the excitement of the Olympic year. The result is the 5 Rings of Mental Toughness. These five rings work together to build an athlete that is eager, disciplined, and committed to be the best they can be. Whether they are striving toward Olympic dreams or Level 6 state meet, these principles will not only help you build better athletes, but better people.

Ring Number 1: Awareness

"If you are not aware of your mind, it's easy to lose it."

The first ring of mental toughness is awareness. An athlete must be aware of what they are thinking if there is any hope of training the mind. Think of yourself in a pitch-black room. You are instructed to move across the room and find a chair on the other side. You begin to move, bumping into everything along the way. You finally find your way to the other side, but not without some bruises on your shins as you reacted to obstacles. That's what life is like without awareness. You go through life blind, without a plan, reacting to what happens to you. When an athlete is aware of thoughts, they can change ways of thinking that are not working for them. Just as you make athletes aware of body positions every day in the gym, the first ring of mental toughness requires you make your athletes become aware of their thoughts. Just as you point out "loose body" to your athletes, begin now to point out "loose mind." Loose mind is any thought that is

negative, fear-based, or doubtful. Over-thinking, complaining, and procrastination, is also loose mind. Can you see loose mind in your gym? Of course, you see it all the time in your athletes face, body language, and behavior. Make your athletes aware of loose mind by pointing it out to them so they can change it.

Ring Number 2: Vision

"If you can imagine it, you can become it."

Many of you have seen me demonstrate the exercise with the string and the weight. When you hold the string with the weight in your hand and visualize the weight swinging from side to side or forward and back, the weight "miraculously" follows your intention. That is the power of Vision. One of the most important exercises to do in any mental training program is helping your athletes create their vision of who they want to be in the gym. How do they want to act? What are their goals for the season? What are their attitude goals? What characteristics do they want to embody every day? Before very much of your season goes by, have your athletes write a list of words describing the gymnast they want to be. Some examples of words are: motivated, confident, focused, happy, proud, aggressive, no holding back, a team leader and positive. Once they set their vision and goals, hold them accountable. Put their sheets up where they can be seen. On a bad day, have them read their vision. Hopefully this will motivate them, call attention to negative behaviors, and strengthen their resolve to be the best they can be.

Ring Number 3: Discipline

"A still mind has unlimited potential."

The mind is a thought factory. It creates thought, after thought, after

thought. Sometimes I call it the monkey mind, because it spends most of its time running around in circles getting into trouble. The monkey mind runs into fear, doubt, and negativity whenever it has a chance. As a coach, you want to help your athletes discipline their minds in order to compete their best. Gymnastics inherently has a lot of down time. During this down time, be it in workout or competition, the monkey can go crazy. The mind only thinks about one thing at a time. The key is "locking down" the mind so that it is focused on positive helpful thoughts. Corrections and positive self-talk are all strong anchors for the mind. Teach your athletes to talk to themselves during all their routines and skills. Be sure they are saying short, sharp, words or corrections. Not too much, not too little. Good, strong cue words anchor the mind, keep the monkey out of fear and doubt, and stop an athlete from over-thinking. Be sure they do these words all the time until they become habit. Doing "arm sets" and "walk-throughs" of routines on each event, are helpful ways to get their cue words automatic. Cue words discipline the mind. Fear, frustration, and negativity are sure signs of loose mind. As a coach, help your athletes discipline their minds by giving them cue words all the time. Cue words can become your greatest ally. As soon as you see loose mind behaviors, have your athletes "lock it down" by focusing on their words.

Ring Number 4: Perseverance

"True champions see every obstacle as opportunity."

Gymnastics is a sport built upon failures. How many mistakes must a gymnast experience before he or she finally learns a skill? Perseverance is essential if an athlete wants to succeed in this sport. When an athlete gives up, what is the first thing that changes? The first thing that changes is always the mind. Their thoughts move from positive to negative, from motivation to defeat. It's important that coaches teach athletes to bring their mind back to "tight" as soon as they notice that it's loose. Just as you correct loose body, correct loose mind as soon as you see it. Tightening the mind is just like strengthening any other muscle. If you allow your athletes to exhibit loose mind behavior, their mental muscle atrophies. Loose mind behavior includes, stalling rituals, balking, negative body language, and negative talk among others. Teach your athletes to have anchor phrases that help bring the mind back to tight. Anchor phrases include phrases like, "breathe, I can do this, don't freak out", or "Don't let it get to me, focus on the correction." Whenever you see loose mind, break the cycle by having your athletes stop, take a deep breath, get a drink, focus on their cue words by doing an arm set or the skill on the floor, and concentrate on their anchor phrases. Breaking the loose mind cycle helps build mental strength and shows other gymnasts that loose mind is not tolerated in your gym.

Ring Number 5: Belief

"There is nothing greater than the power of belief."

Ring number five is the ring that holds all the other rings together: belief. Henry Ford's famous quote is fitting here, "Whether you believe you can, or believe you can't, you're right." A gymnast must believe

that they are strong, talented, a good competitor and so on, if it is to be true. Have your gymnasts talk about how they stand, walk, perform, when they have confidence and belief. Be sure they "act it" in the gym, even if they don't feel it. In addition to how they feel about themselves, you too are extremely influential in the minds of your athletes. What you say and what you do communicates messages of belief and disbelief all the time. Think of your athletes as a blank screen. With everything you say and everything you do, you make an imprint on them. Are you teaching them that they are smart, or that they are stupid? That you care about them as people, or only as gymnasts? Do your actions build character, or break character? Here are some things coaches do that negatively effect the self-esteem of athletes:

- Use sarcasm to make them feel stupid
- Tell them they are fat, lazy, or not talented
- Foster negative competition and comparison
- Undue yelling
- Criticism of the person and not the behavior
- Rhetorical questions that do not have an answer
- Not taking the time to listen to the athlete's response after a question is asked
- Negative talk about an athlete who has quit or is not present in the gym

Remember: you are one of the most influential people in these kids lives. Let them know you believe in them by what you say and do.

How to use the 5 Rings

This season, practice each of the Rings for one week. Here is an outline you can follow.

Week One: Awareness

- Teach your athletes Tight Mind vs. Loose Mind

Week Two: Vision

- Have your athletes set goals for the next eight weeks.
- Have them create the vision of the gymnast they want to be by writing down characteristics.

Week Three: Discipline

- Do key words for all their routines. Be sure they include walk throughs as part of their assignments to make them automatic.

Week Four: Perseverance

- Have your athletes create anchor phrases and be sure to remind them to "tighten their minds" when necessary.

Week Five: Belief

- Have your athletes write what they look like in the gym when they believe. What are their routines like? How do they stand, walk, take correction. Be sure they "act it" all this week.

By doing a little bit of mental training each week, you will save tons of time during the workout. Take the time to train the "Five Rings" and see them come together for you this meet season.

Bio: Alison Arnold Ph.D. is a peak performance consultant to USA Gymnastics. For more information on her Five Rings of Mental Toughness DVD and other products see www.headgames.ws