



*the extra gear*

Mental Toughness Training for Peak Sport Performance

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## Mental Planning

### Introduction

You probably already have a physical routine you use before training and competitions. Maybe you stretch, check your equipment, eat and drink something in particular the morning of a big event. Preparing in this way not only gives you time to do the things you feel are most important to get yourself in the best physical state possible, it also gives you a routine that feels familiar, and can help keep your nerves in check. It is just as important to have a mental plan for competitions, although many athletes neglect this portion of their preparation, often because they don't know what sort of things should go into a mental plan, or how to practice mental skills. A mental plan is a list of mental skills that you can apply in various situations before or during a competition to help you get into or regain the state of mind that will help you perform at your best. Everyone's mental plan will differ, but each one is designed to help athletes get their optimal level of intensity, keep or maintain their focus, mentally rehearse their game plan, work through exertion pain, and stay on track to do their best.

### Things to Put in Your Mental Plan

Think about the mental skills that we have discussed, and consider how they might be used at different points before and during your competition. Consider incorporating some of the following:

- *Goal-Setting* – Focus on what you want to accomplish and how you can accomplish it. Avoid "outcome goals" in competitions, that is, goals that focus on what you want the outcome of the event to be. Rather, think of things you can control and strategies to do them.
- *Self-Talk* – Think about what you can do to recognize negative thoughts that you might have at different points, and what stop signal you can use to stop them. Consider what positive, realistic, instructional, and motivating thoughts can use to replace them with.
- *Psyching Up Psyching Down Techniques* – Consider times when you may feel anxious or tense before or during a competition, and what relaxation techniques would be appropriate at those times. Additionally, think about when you need quick energy, and what psyching up techniques would be helpful to you then.
- *Imagery* – Think how you could use imagery to practice your game strategy before a competition and familiarize yourself mentally with putting your mental plan into practice. Also think about how you could use imagery during a competition to help you stay focused, be confident, or do with exertion pain.
- *Concentration Techniques* – Think about how you can employ the other mental skills listed above to help you stay focused or regain your focus after something unexpected happens. Regaining concentration is particularly important to the refocusing or "oh crap" plan that will be described below.

## Types of Mental Plans

Here are four mental plans you can use before and during an event or to help you get back on track during a competition when things go wrong:

- *The Normal Plan* – Take a few moments and think about what you typically do, both physically and mentally, both for a competition. You might start out by thinking what you do the morning of an event, or even the night before if you have trouble sleeping, for example. Write down everything that you would normally do in order to get yourself in the best physical state and the best frame of mind the night before, the morning of, 30 minutes before, 10 minutes before, and one minute before the event starts. Also think about the times during the event that you believe would be most critical to you; that is, the times that may be toughest. Now write down the mental and physical skills you would use at each of those times to help you compete at your peak. For example, the night before an event may use progressive relaxation to become very physically relaxed and get a good night's sleep. Thirty minutes before the event you may do various stretches in a certain order, check to make sure you have all your proper equipment, use imagery to rehearse your game plan, and use diaphragmatic breathing and positive self-talk to keep you focused and relaxed.
- *The Short Plan* – This is a variation on The Normal Plan. After creating your Normal Plan, consider the physical and mental skills that are most important for you to do and that can be done quickly. For example, select the stretches and mental skills that would be most helpful to do quickly to get you in the proper state in, say, five minutes. Use this Short Plan when you have a limited time to prepare before an event, like when you arrive late.
- *The Long Plan* – This is another variation on The Normal Plan, but this one helps you decide what mental and physical skills to use when you need to take much longer than you thought to prepare for an event, like when you arrive very early or an event is delayed. Consider what physical and mental skills you would add to The Normal Plan to keep yourself relaxed and sharp.
- *The "Oh Crap" Plan* – Athletes frequently rehearse the way they want things to go in a competition, but almost inevitably something unexpected happens. When the unexpected happens it is very easy to become distracted and have trouble getting refocused on to what needs to be done. Therefore, I recommend that athletes think about what mental and physical skills they would want to use after something goes wrong (that is, when during a competition you find yourself saying, "Oh crap!"). For example, imagine that you are a cyclist or a triathlete and get a flat tire during a race. When you hear yourself say, "Oh crap!" it will be a reminder to initiate this plan, which could include such things as using thought stopping and self-talk to give you instructions about what you need to do, breathing techniques to keep you from becoming too nervous, and imagery or cue words and phrases to keep you focused.

## Practice Makes Perfect

For these plans to work, you must practice them – a lot. Practice them every time you train and modify them to better suit your needs. Once these plans become automatic begin using them in competitions to help you perform at your peak.

*For more information on goal-setting and other mental skills techniques to improve sport performance, contact sport psychologist Dana Blackmer, Ph.D. at [Dana@TheExtraGear.com](mailto:Dana@TheExtraGear.com) or visit The Extra Gear online at [www.TheExtraGear.com](http://www.TheExtraGear.com).*