

5 Pillars of Mental Toughness



by **Dr. Chris Stankovich**, founder of Advanced Human Performance Systems, a counseling & performance center in Columbus, Ohio

Want to take your game to the next level and reach your full athletic potential? Physical training will only take you so far. Success in sports also depends on many aspects of mental toughness, including the ability to increase self-confidence, improve focus, sharpen your mental preparation, control arousal (or energy level) and develop resilience.

Although it is invaluable for sport success, mental toughness is often a misunderstood part of athletic development. Yet how you develop your mind will directly impact how well you play your sport—for better or for worse.

The reality—and the good news for athletes—is that mental toughness can be learned. The “Five Pillars of Mental Toughness” are skills you can develop and improve. Using them will lead directly to future success in sports.

1 Preparation

Mental preparation includes how well you pay attention to details, your level of self-discipline, and the attitude you develop that helps you stay positive and optimistic. Mentally prepared athletes achieve success in the classroom, train regularly, and avoid negative influences that can interfere with their athletic development.

Use the following questions to gauge your level of mental preparation:

- Are you fully aware of the expectations placed on you by your team?
- Do you know your role on the team?
- Are you keeping up with all of your responsibilities—and not just sports?
- Do you make it a point to adopt a positive attitude every day?
- Are you working hard every day to become the best player you can be?

2 Focus

Another vitally important component of athletic success, focus is often the difference between two equally talented athletes. Even elite athletes can lose focus, both on and off the field.

Here are three ways to improve your focus:

■ Ignore irrelevant distractions

Identify the things that are critical to your future athletic success—like staying in top physical condition, eating right and getting proper rest—and block out irrelevant factors—like what is being said about you on Twitter and in sports chat rooms. Remember, the only play that is important is the next play, so focus accordingly.

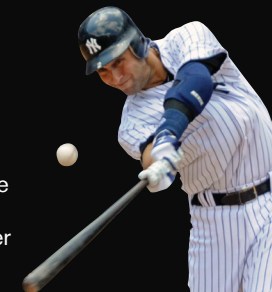
Master your mind and perform like Derek Jeter

■ Journal your progress

Keep a journal of your goals, accomplishments and notes about how to continue to improve. Since human memory can sometimes be sketchy, developing a journaling system will help you improve your focus.

■ Balance your time

It's tempting to devote all of your free time to sports, but your focus will actually improve if you maintain a more balanced schedule. Prioritize family, school and other important parts of your life as much as you do sports. When you balance, you will increase your motivation, feel fresher when you play and lower the risk of burnout.



3 Arousal Control

To achieve athletic success, it's important to know how to calm down when you're nervous (high arousal), and how to get pumped up when you're flat (low arousal).

The “zone” is the state of optimal arousal. Athletes who are “in the zone” don't have to think when playing their sport; they simply react. Learn how to modify your energy level and find a happy medium between high and low arousal.

Calming Down

- Take one or two deep breaths into your stomach and hold each one for four or five seconds. Deep breathing is the best way to calm your nerves and lower arousal.
- Use imagery to generate positive, calming thoughts
 - Starting with one muscle group, tense and relax it for 4 or 5 seconds, then go through the rest of your body



Larry Fitzgerald gets focused

Pumping Up

- Listen to upbeat music on game days
- Increase your heart rate with a dynamic warm-up
- Review your personal goals

4 Confidence

Confidence and athletic success are closely correlated, and they reinforce each other. When you play well, your confidence increases, and when you improve your self-confidence, you tend to play better.

Here are some techniques that improve confidence:

■ Goal setting

Set goals you can control and that are specific and measurable; and be sure to keep track of your progress. Set short-term, mid-term and long-term goals. You will be creating a goal ladder to future success. Short-term goals will lead to long-term goals.

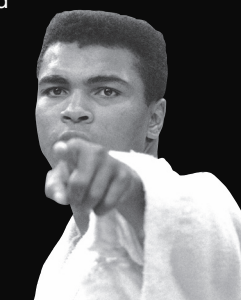
■ Consistent, healthy training

There are no shortcuts to success; and hard work, healthy living, motivation and perseverance will lead to greater self-confidence.

■ Positive self-talk

If you tell yourself you stink, your confidence will suffer. Positive and productive self-talk will boost your confidence.

Heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali



Kobe Bryant won't let anything stop him

5 Resilience

Resilience is the ability to handle stress, adversity and failure. Regardless of how talented you are, there will be days when things don't go right. This is where character develops. You either overcome the adversity or succumb to it. When you learn ways to deal with stress and adversity, you improve your chances for athletic excellence in many ways.

Athletes who allow their emotions to take over usually end up playing below their potential. It's your choice what to do the next time you drop a ball, strike out or miss an open shot. You can either view negative events as threats to your athletic development or as challenges to make yourself better the next time the situation occurs. Feeling sorry for yourself, throwing tantrums or taking your aggression out on others won't help, but learning from those experiences will.

Creating a bounce-back technique will help in moments of failure and frustration. A bounce-back technique is a ritual you perform during a game that allows you to quickly turn things around in your mind. For example, after a bad play you might pinch a few blades of grass and throw them into the wind—a symbol for letting that last play go. The technique should be quick, unobtrusive and linked in your mind to letting a bad play go.

Knowing what you will do when failure occurs will prepare you for times when you do come up short.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACK WELCH

PHOTOS: AP (4)

STACK.COM Find more tips on building mental toughness at STACK.com/MentalToughness