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Mental Preparation and Toughness in Sports

Mental preparation and toughness have been talked about among the sports world for years now. Sports reporters and psychologists are beginning to believe a person’s mind set and mental state is extremely influential on their in-game performance. Mental preparation helps athletes achieve a focused, confident and trusting mindset to help them compete at their highest level. (Michael Edger) Walt Jocketty, general manager of the 2006 World Series champion St. Louis Cardinals, said,” The mental side of the game is extremely important.” (Jason Selk) This begins to demonstrate how peoples’ views of this side of the game began to change. All of the sudden it became more important. I am sure everyone has heard one of the sayings; “Great battles are won in the mind and not on the battle grounds.” (Delice Coffey) or “Sports are 90% mental and only 10% physical.” (Annie Plessinger) This makes it important for a person to know how to get a competitive mental edge in any way on their opponent. In this paper my goal is to find a good way to effectively become more mentally ready for games and how to maintain a quality performance throughout the whole season. In order for mental preparation to work, a person must have belief in the process and believe that it will work. The key components of mental preparation and toughness are self confidence, visualization, goal setting, and breath control.

Self confidence is the most important aspect of a person’s entire mental game and performance out on the field. Self confidence is said to play a critical role in athletes’ success; in contrast, lack of self confidence seems to be closely associated with athletic failure (Deborah Feltz). A person shouldn’t worry about being modest with them self because nobody can hear what is going on in his mind. (John Lefkowits) Now don’t get me wrong, self confidence is NOT being cocky about a person’s own skills to others. Self confidence is merely a person being confident in them self so that he will be able to achieve the task at hand. If a person doesn’t believe in himself, then nobody will believe in that person. (Jason Selk) Confidence comes from a series of a person’s past success that you can draw on. (James Barrell) Weinberg and his colleagues’ manipulated subjects' expectations about competing in a race by having them observe their competitor, who either performed poorly on a related task and was said to have a knee injury, or who performed well and was said to be a varsity track athlete. Results showed that subjects who competed against an injured competitor endured longer and raced better than those who competed against a varsity athlete. (Deborah Feltz) This information shows that the people who competed against the injured runner were more confident at the start of the race that they would win and evidently they performed better in the race. In order to acquire this ability of self confidence a person must follow the ways to improve their self confidence.

One of these ways to improve self confidence is by a process called visualization. Visualization is recalling past great performances in a one’s mind and using them to help get focused on the upcoming event. The most popular way people visualize is by running through their own sports center top 10 plays and remembering how they felt during that experience. (Jason Selk) Imagery is supposed to help create sort of a déjà vu feeling when a person is playing. (Dorothy Harris) That way when a person encounters a similar scenario it isn’t foreign or unknown grounds they have to deal with. They should know what to do. There is no specific way to practice mental imagery. Each person may have a different preference on the type of visualization that works best for them. (Elizabeth Quinn) Coach Onstott is a 100% believer in visualization and says that when he was an athlete in high school, he used this technique before every game while listening to his music. (Pat Onstott) In a recent experiment conducted by Roure et al, they found six specific autonomic nervous system (ANS) responses that linked with mental rehearsal, thereby improving sports performance.(Annie Plessinger) This research shows that by practicing the system of visualization a person’s sports performance will improve from the help of the ANS. Every two minutes a person spends visualizing is equal to seven minutes of physical training. (Jason Selk) Visualization alone isn’t going to provide full self confidence and mental preparation for a person, but with the help of self talk it is quite possible that a person could reach that ultimate goal.

The second way to improve self confidence is by self talk. Self talk goes right with visualization because a person is able to improve self confidence by doing them at the same time. Self talk is a person telling them self what they need to do or a person offering them self encouragement. (John Lefkowits) There are two different kinds of self talk; instructional self talk and motivational self talk. Instructional self talk is used when improving fine skills or technique. Motivational self talk is used when a person needs to boost their confidence and psych them self up. (Rick Nauert) When performing a self talk a person should repeat the statement that most effectively gets them focused on being successful. (Jason Selk) Self talks should also include statements that emphasize the qualities and attributes of the athlete. (Richard Butler) Self talks are meant to help improve a person’s game so while performing these self talks a person should never let a negative though enter his mind. Also each self talk a person does should remain consistent with previous ones to prepare them self in the same way for each performance.(Rick Nauert) This should be done so a person isn’t changing variables and second guessing their pregame mental preparation on game day. With all this said none of it will work if a person doesn’t have an efficient breathing program.

If a person doesn’t have a consistent breathing program they could do all of the other mental preparation techniques, but still go out there and tense up because they aren’t relaxed. Studies are showing that yoga’s approach to concentration and breath awareness can improve a person’s mental focus and mental endurance. (Lee Kennedy) When breathing a person should take long inhales and long exhales to slow the heart rate. By slowing the heart rate a person will also be gaining better control of their arousal state and ability to think under pressure. (Jason Selk) This breathing technique can be done before, during, and after the game in order for a person to calm them self down. When a person is able to breathe like this it can relax the muscles and by having those relaxed muscles a person will consequently perform at a higher level. (Dorothy Harris) When a person’s heart beat goes to 120 beats per minute, the mind will not be nearly as sharp, and at 150 beats per minute, the mind will essentially shut down and go into survival mode. (Jason Selk) That helps stress the importance of breathing slowly and slowing that heart rate. Most people would want to be able to think when the game is on the line or in any type of pressure situation. All of this shows breathing is very important when it comes to making smart decisions in the game.

In conclusion mental preparation and toughness are produce by having high self confidence, visualizing, self talks, and controlling breathing. When a person is preparing for a big game it is important that they at least do one of these things to help their performance otherwise anything could happen. Self confidence boosting is the best thing a person could possibly do for improving their mental game.The most interesting thing I learned was that two minutes of visualization is equivalent to seven minutes of physical training. Now I recommend to anyone that read this not to just let this information go in one ear and out the other. A person should at least give these mental preparation ideas a try. The worst that could happen is a person wastes 10 minutes of their life and the best thing that could happen is that a person performs well. I would say it’s a good trade off.