

## **The Nine Mental Skills of Successful Athletes**

**Jack J. Lesyk, Ph.D.**

You don't have to be a professional athlete or an Olympic champion to be a successful athlete. Nor do you have to have a room full of trophies, win a state championship, or make the front page of the sports section. Successful athletes that I've worked with include an eleven year-old figure skater who has not yet won a competition, a high school golfer with a zero handicap, a middle-aged runner whose goal is to complete her first marathon, a weight lifter who holds several world records, and an Olympic medalist. What these athletes have in common is that their sport is important to them and they're committed to being the best that they can be within the scope of their limitations – other life commitments, finances, time, and their natural ability. They set high, realistic goals for themselves and train and play hard. They are successful because they are pursuing their goals and enjoying their sport. Their sport participation enriches their lives and they believe that what they get back is worth what they put into their sport. There are nine, specific mental skills that contribute to success in sports. They are all learned and can be improved with instruction and practice. At the Ohio Center for Sport Psychology we work with serious athletes of all ages and ability levels to help them learn and sharpen these important skills. We believe that our work is worthwhile because the same mental skills that athletes use in achieving success in sports can be used to achieve success in other areas of their lives.

A Brief List of the Nine Mental Skills

### **Successful Athletes:**

1. Choose and maintain a positive attitude.
2. Maintain a high level of self-motivation.
3. Set high, realistic goals.
4. Deal effectively with people.
5. Use positive self-talk.
6. Use positive mental imagery.
7. Manage anxiety effectively.
8. Manage their emotions effectively.
9. Maintain concentration.

### **Mental Skills Training**

These nine mental skills are necessary for performing well in sport as well as in non-sport performance situations. At the Ohio Center for Sport Psychology:

- We believe that these skills are learned and can be improved through instruction and practice.
- We begin our work with each individual by assessing his current proficiency in each of the skills.
- We develop a plan for teaching and enhancing the specific skills that need improvement for the individual.
- We periodically reassess the client's proficiency in each of the skills in order to evaluate our progress.

### **The Performance Pyramid**

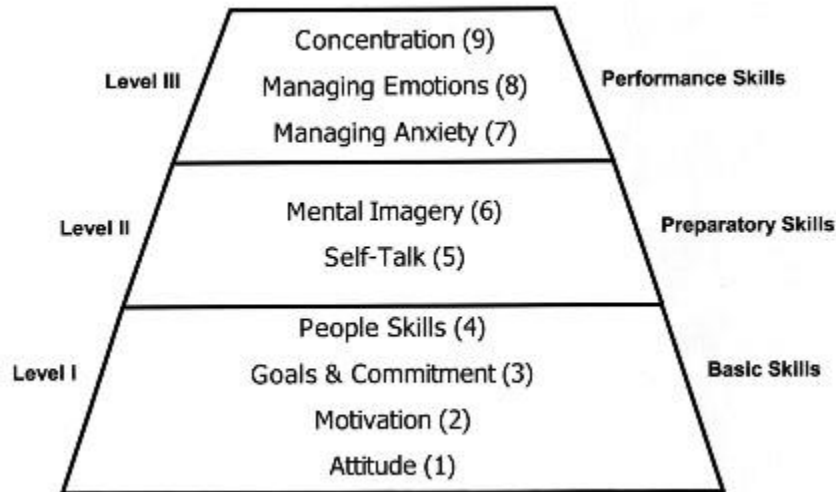
Although each of the nine skills is important, its primary importance will occur during one of three phases: long-term development, immediate preparation for performance, and during performance itself.

**Level I** - These mental skills constitute a broad base for attaining long-term goals, learning, and sustaining daily practice. They are needed on a day-by-day basis for long periods of time, often months and years.

**Level II** - These skills are used immediately before performance to prepare for performance. They may be used just before competition begins, or immediately before a specific performance action, such as a golf shot or a free throw in basketball.

**Level III** - These skills are used during actual performance behavior.

The pyramid below represents the relationship of the nine skills to one another. Each of the higher levels incorporates and is based upon the skills of the preceding levels.



Detailed Descriptions of the Nine Mental Skills

### **1. Attitude**

Successful athletes:

- Realize that attitude is a choice.
- Choose an attitude that is predominately positive.
- View their sport as an opportunity to compete against themselves and learn from their successes and failures.
- Pursue excellence, not perfection, and realize that they, as well as their coaches, teammates, officials, and others are not perfect.
- Maintain balance and perspective between their sport and the rest of their lives.
- Respect their sport, other participants, coaches, officials, and themselves.

### **2. Motivation**

Successful athletes:

- Are aware of the rewards and benefits that they expect to experience through their sports participation.
- Are able to persist through difficult tasks and difficult times, even when these rewards and benefits are not immediately forthcoming.
- Realize that many of the benefits come from their participation, not the outcome.

### **3. Goals and Commitment**

Successful athletes:

- Set long-term and short-term goals that are realistic, measurable, and time-oriented.
- Are aware of their current performance levels and are able to develop specific, detailed plans for attaining their goals.
- Are highly committed to their goals and to carrying out the daily demands of their training programs.

### **4. People Skills**

Successful athletes:

- Realize that they are part of a larger system that includes their families, friends, teammates, coaches, and others.
- When appropriate, communicate their thoughts, feelings, and needs to these people and listen to them as well.
- Have learned effective skills for dealing with conflict, difficult opponents, and other people when they are negative or oppositional.

### **5. Self-Talk**

Successful athletes:

- Maintain their self-confidence during difficult times with realistic, positive self-talk.
- Talk to themselves the way they would talk to their own best friend
- Use self-talk to regulate thoughts, feelings and behaviors during competition.

### **6. Mental Imagery**

Successful athletes:

- Prepare themselves for competition by imagining themselves performing well in competition.
- Create and use mental images that are detailed, specific, and realistic.
- Use imagery during competition to prepare for action and recover from errors and poor performances.

### **7. Dealing Effectively with Anxiety**

Successful athletes:

- Accept anxiety as part of sport.
- Realize that some degree of anxiety can help them perform well.
- Know how to reduce anxiety when it becomes too strong, without losing their intensity.

### **8. Dealing Effectively with Emotions**

Successful athletes:

- Accept strong emotions such as excitement, anger, and disappointment as part of the sport experience.
- Are able to use these emotions to improve, rather than interfere with high level performance

### **9. Concentration**

Successful athletes:

- Know what they must pay attention to during each game or sport situation.
- Have learned how to maintain focus and resist distractions, whether they come from the environment or from within themselves.
- Are able to regain their focus when concentration is lost during competition.
- Have learned how to play in the “here-and-now”, without regard to either past or anticipated future events.

Application of the Nine Mental Skills to Non-sport Performance Situations

The nine mental skills associated with athletic success are the same mental skills associated with performance in a wide variety of non-sport, performance situations. Let’s take a look at some of these.

Characteristics of A Performance Situation:

- The situation is often scheduled or anticipated in advance.
- The situation usually has a defined beginning and an end.
- The circumstances are known in advance.
- The rules and constraints are known in advance.
- The results are evaluated by standards (or natural consequences) that are usually known in advance.
- The results are uncertain and may involve psychological risk and/or danger.
- The results are important to the performer.
- The performer’s behavior is goal-oriented.

- The results are influenced by the performer's skillful behavior

#### Examples of Performance Situations

An important job interview  
Performing a solo with a symphony orchestra  
Auditioning for a role in a drama production  
Giving a class presentation  
Taking a driver's examination  
Giving a talk to the PTA  
Testifying in court  
Taking the state medical exam  
Performing brain surgery  
Landing an airplane  
A firefighter entering a burning building  
Participating in a military or police attack  
An astronaut landing a vehicle on the surface of the moon  
Rock Climbing

At the Ohio Center for Sport Psychology we help people develop the important skills necessary for high-level performance in sport and non-sport performance situations.

#### **How to Use Imagery - Step-by-Step Guide**

The first time you try imagery it's helpful to have a skilled facilitator or practitioner walk you through the process. This is referred to as guided imagery. You can also use CDs or tapes, or record your own script to use as your guide. After you are comfortable with the technique, it's easy to practice these techniques on your own.

1. Sit in a comfortable place where you won't be interrupted.
2. Relax your body and take several long, slow breaths.
3. Close your eyes and create a vivid and convincing image. This image can be one you've previously experienced, or one you simply desire.
4. If you become distracted or find you are thinking about something else, simply acknowledge it and let it go.
5. Focus on your breathing if you lose the image.
6. Maintain a positive attitude.
7. Imagine the sights, sounds, tastes, feelings, and even smells of the experience.
8. Take note of as much detail of the scene as possible. What are you wearing, who is there, what are you hearing, how do you feel?
9. If your imagery session is not going the way you want it to, simply open your eyes and start over with your breathing.
10. Always end an imagery session with a positive image

## Dealing with performance anxiety

Many athletes perform their best during training or practice and find that they choke during competition. If this happens to you take heart because there are some simple steps you can take to overcome such anxiety.

Choking is described as a decrease in performance due to too much perceived stress. The key word here is perceived. Keep in mind that stress lives only in your mind and in the way we interpret a situation. Ultimately, it is not the external situation that causes stress, but the way we think about that event that creates feelings of stress, anxiety and fear. For athletes who choke during competition it is important to understand that you can control the thoughts you have regarding the event. Are your thoughts of doubt, failure and a lack of confidence in your ability? If so, such negative thinking often breeds feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and tension. How do you expect to perform well given such an internal environment?

Traditional coaches and trainers may try to help the athlete understand why those thoughts and feelings develop and then try to change or modify that process with limited amounts of success. Why such thoughts arise may be of interest, but knowing the answer isn't always necessary to overcome them.

### **Before the event:**

Understand that pre-race jitters are normal and accept them. Don't fight the nervous energy you feel. Don't misinterpret it by thinking that it is fear. That adrenaline rush you feel is normal and it is part of your body's natural preparation for the competition. Notice it, but don't focus on it. Once the race starts, that feeling will subside, as it always does. Prepare both mentally and physically. Arrive at the event with plenty of time so you aren't rushed, which only increases your stress. Get a thorough warm-up. Do some easy stretching. Know the course. Dress for conditions.

Allow a few minutes to visualize yourself doing everything right. Breathe easy, close your eyes and use mental imagery to visualize yourself performing well. This positive self-talk can change your attitude. While athletes need to be flexible enough to react during the event, you should enter the event with a general strategy of how you want to race. Your strategy can be simple (maintain a steady pace or maintain a steady heart rate) or complex.

### **During the event:**

Focus on the task at hand rather than the outcome. Stay present in the moment and avoid thinking too far into the event or thinking about the finish.

If you find yourself thinking negative thoughts or negative self-talk, stop and focus only on your breathing. Focusing on your breathing rhythm will automatically pull you back into the present. Force a smile. Really. If you are struggling with negative thoughts and can't break out of the cycle, simply force yourself to smile, even if only for a few seconds. This simple action will change your attitude in a split second. Perhaps that is all the time you need to relax back into your performance.

Race like you don't care about the outcome. If you find yourself caught up in negative thoughts and find that you suddenly expect the worst it will be impossible to perform at your peak. If you begin to race like you don't care about the outcome, you may relax and enjoy the event for what it is - another day in your life. Not the most important thing in your life.

### **After the event:**

Review the race and recall the things you did well. Focus on actions, thoughts and behaviors that helped you perform. Acknowledge, but quickly dismiss things that hindered your performance. This is the same principle as avoiding an obstacle while driving - look where you want to go, not where you don't. When you focus on the pothole, you invariably hit it. Focusing on the negative aspects of the event will not help you improve in the future. Rather, you want to focus on the times when you 'got it right.' This is a form of mental rehearsal where you practice skills that will be used in the next event. Design a training

program that mimics race-like conditions. Teams and clubs often do such training. If you always train alone, consider joining a group so you can do this type of simulation. Practice is most effective if you can mimic the conditions you will be faced with in competition. Coaches can also help or hinder an athlete's ability to overcome choking during competition. Coaches often inadvertently reinforce a pattern of choking when trying to encourage ("the next shot is critical"). Such talk only increases the pressure an athlete feels to perform.

Remember that choking can be dealt with if you are aware of the pattern of negative thoughts that snowball before and during competition. If you find yourself in such a downward spiral, simply acknowledge those thoughts and let them go. Focus on your breathing and play as though you are enjoying it. Chances are you will realize that you are enjoying it despite the occasional less than perfect performance.

### Peaking

Athletes use the term "peaking" to describe being in the absolute best condition (physical, emotional and mental) at a specific time for an event or race. Peaking is not easy to do, and it requires a lot of experience and planning, but there are things that can make peaking much more likely.

Keep in mind that you can have many "peaks" during the year and during the season, but most elite athletes aim for one primary event or goal, and plan the rest of the training season around that.

Recreational athletes can easily have multiple peaks of a lesser degree. This is common if you race many different "fun runs" during the summer. If you are on a recreational league or team you probably have a built-in season, and your training is planned so you continually improve and peak during play-offs or a final event.

Start your planning by getting out a calendar and writing down your one or two goal events and work backward to today. There are many ways to plan your schedule, and working with an expert coach is probably the best.

The following tips will help you build a general plan of your own. Your training program will include four phases:

1. Building a base of fitness
2. Building aerobic capacity
3. Building speed
4. Tapering for the event

#### **Phase One: Building a Base With Long Slow Distance**

About half of your training time between your start day and your first goal event should be spent building a solid base of fitness for your sport. This can last months if you are a new exerciser or if your goal event is a long way away, or weeks if you are in shape and looking at an event next month. Most of these early workouts focus on easy endurance training. These workouts can feel too easy for many athletes who like to go fast or hard to feel like they are getting something out of it. Don't make this mistake. Stay easy and slow, focus on improving technique, strength and endurance.

Base training is extremely important to peaking and cannot be rushed. If you start intense work too soon, you are risking injury or illness later on. Base training allows muscles, joints and tendons to get stronger slowly and adapt easily to increased loads and efforts. Base training includes some easy [cross training](#) as well.

This is a good time to play with training and add skill drills, [plyometrics](#) and strength training to build a nice overall level of conditioning. It's also a great time to find the right combination of equipment ([shoes](#), clothing, [bike position](#), racket tension, etc...) or [food and drink](#) that works for you.

Base fitness is all about getting out there and moving and having fun. Pace, intensity and effort really isn't important.

### **Phase Two: Building Aerobic Capacity Through Sustained Efforts**

The next phase of a standard peaking program comprises the next quarter (or so) of your training time between the start day and the race day. During this time, you focus on increasing your aerobic capacity, power and speed and getting more "sport-specific." You also need to adhere to [the 10 Percent Rule](#) to avoid injury. During this phase you increase training effort by maintaining long, higher intensity sustained efforts. Your training volume may stay the same and you'll include more rest days. Your strengthening program becomes more focused on your sport.

### **Phase Three: [High Intensity Intervals](#) for Speed**

After you've built your base, speed and power, you are ready to focus on specific training needed for your race or event. You add interval work of high-intensity, shorter duration efforts (60-90 seconds sprints). This is very intense training that requires more rest between work outs. Injuries are more likely too, so following a rest and recovery schedule is critical. For an example of a treadmill interval workout, see [Interval Training](#).

### **Phase Four: Tapering Before the Event**

The final phase of race preparation is the taper. This comprises the last two weeks prior to your event. In this phase you reduce your training volume (mileage) by half. You continue to do high-intensity intervals, but reduce the number of repeats that you do by half and rest fully between them.

The final three days before the event can include some light, aerobic exercise, but remember the goal is to rest so you will have peak potential on race day. Training three days before the race never helps you performance. These last few days are also a good time to focus on the [mental aspects of performance](#) and visualizing a perfect event. And consider [your pre-race meal](#) choice.

You can only stay at this peak fitness level for a short period of time, and you must rest and recover again before a second event. Trying to hold on to such a peak often leads to injury, burn out and [overtraining syndrome](#). Consider using [Active Recovery](#) for a faster recovery.