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It's the “Doing” That is Tough

Recently, I received an email from an athlete looking for resources to guide him in the “how” of mental skills training. He indicated that he knows about various mental skills and their importance but has trouble actually “doing it”. This echoes comments I’ve heard from a multitude of coaches and athletes and confirms observations of athletes; that is, mental skills/sport psychology concepts are relatively easy to understand (there probably is not a coach or athlete who is not familiar with concepts such as concentration, self-confidence, goal setting, or motivation), but these same concepts are tough to learn and consistently implement.

Think for a minute about a tennis player who yells at herself to “focus before your blow this match” after dropping the first set on a double fault. Can this athlete, who knows about focusing and the importance of keeping her mind in the game, effectively implement a refocusing strategy in the middle of a contentious match? She knows that she should, but can she ‘do’ and ‘do’ effectively? Ask yourself whether you have learned and developed the mental skills necessary for success in your sport or whether the tennis player example rings true for you.

Over the next several issues of the NSCA’s Performance Training Journal, we are going to address the doing part of the equation where the focus will be on putting into action specific mental skills (and less on the knowing part of the equation).

Let us begin this pursuit with the skill of goal setting. Most athletes already set goals so the challenge is probably not in setting goals. Rather, the challenge is in setting goals that will influence behavior—setting effective goals. To do this well, we need to figure out a way of incorporating or applying scientifically-derived goal setting principles. Research on goals tells us that the following factors consistently enhance the effectiveness of goal setting (1):

- Goals should be specific (versus general or “do your best” types of goals),
- Goals should be moderately difficult so as to challenge,

- Short- and long-term goals should be set,
- Goals that relate to both outcome (e.g., Win, achieve a specific time) and the process of performance (“explode out of the blocks”) are important,
- Set goals in practice and competition,
- Goals need to be recorded and evaluated.

That seems like a lot of things to think about and incorporate. But wait, read the list again as the reality is that a lot of these principles most athletes are incorporating already.

The following exercise is one way of how to “do” goal setting effectively. Keep in mind that there is no best way to do this, but there probably is a best or certainly better way for you. Your job is to adapt it to your unique situation. While you will read quickly through the following section, it is meant for you to come back to when you have time and can really put some thought into your responses.

1. Write down your season goal.

Notice the first word—WRITE. Commit this to paper to make it “real” and also enable you to honestly evaluate this and ensuing goals. Is your goal challenging yet realistic for you to accomplish with hard work and dedication? If you are like most athletes, you did not hesitate identifying your goal, as such a long term goal is often at the forefront and serves as a motivational force behind daily training. We are not done as this long term goal tells you where you want to go, but is not enough as you need a path to get there.

2. Identify the primary skills and abilities you need to achieve this goal.

Your long-term goal may be to win State or qualify for Nationals, but what is needed to accomplish this? Some skills and abilities you may need could include developing greater strength, increasing flexibility, improving a specific aspect of technique or enhancing your emotional control during games.

3. List, specifically, the things you can and need to do to develop these skills and abilities.

For example, suppose you need to develop core strength if you are to achieve your goal of running a sub-11 seconds 100 meters. You will need to identify the specific core exercises and proper progressions to develop this strength. It may be helpful to solicit input from your coach as to specific skills and abilities that will lead to long-term development and success.

4. Based on this goal breakdown, identify one thing you are going to work on today to help you reach your long-term goal. Then, do the same tomorrow and the next day.

Is the goal for practice specific enough such that you (or your coach) will know if you accomplish it? While your daily goal may seem far removed from where you want to be at the end of the season, it is a necessary step to get there.

Goals, when set effectively, can provide direction, enhance training motivation, and build confidence as you see success and improvement (that may otherwise go unnoticed). Time for you to get to work on the "doing" of setting goals. ■

References

1. Weinberg, R. & Gould, D. (2007). Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.



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