

about the
AUTHOR

Suzie Tuffey Riewald received her degrees in Sport Psychology/ Exercise Science from the University of North Carolina —Greensboro. She has worked for USA Swimming as the Sport Psychology and Sport Science Director, and most recently as the Associate Director of Coaching with the USOC where she worked with various sport national governing bodies (NGBs) to develop and enhance coaching education and training. Suzie currently works as a sport psychology consultant to several NGBs.

Mental Training Fundamentals

The theme of this issue of the *NSCA's Performance Training Journal* is conditioning fundamentals. These fundamentals relate to the basic or essential elements of physical conditioning; they are important to grasp as they serve as a foundation for a sound conditioning program. In this Mind Games column, as you know, the focus is on the mental aspect of training and competition. In sticking with the theme of this issue, let's "twist" things a bit by applying this notion of fundamentals to mental conditioning. That is, we'll take a look at some basics of mental conditioning (training) that are important to grasp if one is to launch or maintain a mental training program.

Mental skills can be (and need to be) learned and developed.

Having not played any basketball, would you expect to pick up a ball and sink three pointers? Do you think a hurdler could learn and execute correct hurdling technique after a few pointers from a coach? Could you run a fast 10k after just a solid week of training? No, no, and no. They seem like insane questions, right? We all know that learning and developing physical and technical skills takes practice, practice and more practice. Why then do we think differently when it comes to mental skills?

Remember, mental skills are just that, skills. Just like physical and technical skills, they need to be learned and developed if one is to become proficient in their use. Oftentimes, coaches and athletes approach mental skills as something an athlete either has or does not have (i.e., she is confident or she is not confident) or as something one can "pick up" and be proficient at in matter of hours or days. Mental skills are skills that can be and need to be learned and developed.

Mental training is work.

Athletes can learn skills and strategies to help them manage what goes on internally and to manage the external environment. However it is not easy, and because of this

some athletes never develop that ability fully. Effective mental training takes time, effort, persistence, consistency, etc. All too often, an athlete will throw in the towel on trying to manage negative self-talk when after one practice session "it just didn't work, I still had doubts". Developing physical and technical skills takes hours, days, weeks, months, even years of work. A lot of time, effort, and persistence go into developing these skills; the same applies to mental skills. Be realistic by acknowledging that whether you are trying to build confidence, maintain daily motivation, enhance concentration, or manage internal dialogue, it is going to take work.

Mental Skills are valuable, period.

Felix, a master's level triathlete, had a training partner who suggested he pick up a book on sport psychology as he was really struggling with his confidence. "No, that won't help me—I'm just a recreational athlete" was his response. Some athletes, like Felix, hold an assumption that mental skills are important only for the elite level or highly competitive athlete. Unfortunately, holding such an assumption precludes one from even attempting to address the mental aspect of practice and performance. There are no qualifiers; mental training can be valuable, period. Mental training can benefit the younger athlete who needs to focus better in practice, the older athlete working to bring more quality to limited training time, the recreational athlete like Felix who lacks confidence, the professional athlete trying to optimize performance, and the exercise participant who wants to enhance enjoyment. Mental training can be of value to all athletes, irrespective of age, experience, ability, and goals.

Recognizing that mental skills are skills that can be learned and developed, that mental skills training takes work, and that mental skills are valuable to performance can set the stage for your mental training success. ■