

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

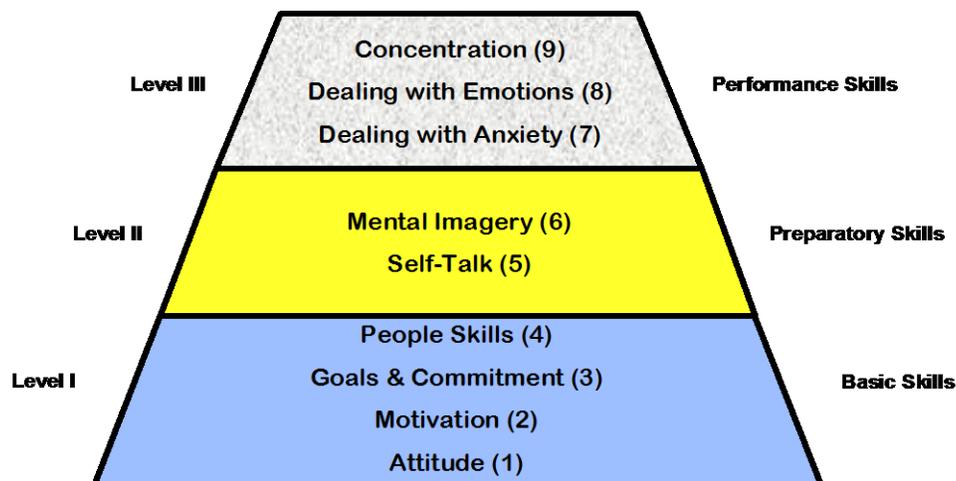
Although each of the nine skills is important, its primary importance will occur during one of three phases: long-term development, immediate preparation for performance, and performance.

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 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.

The Nine Mental Skills of Successful Athletes

A Self-Assessment

Jack J. Lesyk, Ph.D.

Athlete _____

Date _____ Sport _____

Directions

Please read the description of each of the mental skills carefully. After reading the description, think about your own sport experience during the past _____. To what extent does your behavior fit the description? Please answer by placing a number between 0 and 10 on the line in front of each item. The more your own behavior fits the description, the higher the number should be (0 means not at all similar; 10 means very similar).

Attitude (1)

1. _____ I realize that attitude is a choice.
2. _____ I choose an attitude that is predominately positive.
3. _____ I view my sport as an opportunity to compete against myself and learn from my successes and failures.
4. _____ I pursue excellence, not perfection, and realize that I, my coaches, teammates, officials, and others are not perfect.
5. _____ I maintain balance and perspective between my sport and the rest of my life.
6. _____ I respect my sport, the other participants, coaches, officials, and myself.

Motivation (2)

7. _____ I am aware of the rewards and benefits that I expect to experience through my sports participation.
8. _____ I am able to persist through difficult tasks and difficult times, even when these rewards and benefits are not immediately forthcoming.
9. _____ I realize that many of the benefits come from my participation, not the outcome.

Goals and Commitment (3)

10. _____ I set long-term and short-term goals that are realistic, measurable, and time-oriented.
11. _____ I am aware of my current performance level and have developed specific, detailed plans for attaining my goals.
12. _____ I am committed to my goals and carrying out the daily demands of my training program.

People Skills (4)

13. _____ I realize that I am part of a larger system that includes my family, friends, teammates, coaches, and others.
14. _____ When appropriate, I communicate my thoughts, feelings, and needs to these people and listen to them as well.
15. _____ I have learned effective skills for dealing with conflict, difficult opponents, and other people when they are negative or oppositional.

Self-Talk (5)

16. _____ I maintain my self-confidence during difficult times with realistic, positive self-talk.
17. _____ I talk to myself the way I would talk to my own best friend.
18. _____ I use self-talk to regulate thoughts, feelings and behaviors during competition.

Mental Imagery (6)

19. _____ I prepare myself for competition by imagining myself performing well in competition.
20. _____ I create and use mental images that are detailed, specific, and realistic.
21. _____ I use mental imagery during competition to prepare for action and recover from errors and poor performances.

Dealing with Anxiety (7)

22. _____ I accept anxiety as part of sport.
23. _____ I realize that some degree of anxiety can help me perform well.
24. _____ I know how to reduce anxiety when it becomes too strong, without losing my intensity.

Dealing with Emotions (8)

25. _____ I accept strong emotions such as excitement, anger, and disappointment as part of the sport experience.
26. _____ I am able to use these emotions to improve, rather than interfere with high level performance.

Concentration (9)

27. _____ I know what I must pay attention to during each game or sport situation.
28. _____ During competition I am able to maintain focus and resist distractions, whether they come from the environment or from within myself.
29. _____ In competition, I am able to regain my focus when I lose concentration.
30. _____ I have learned how to play in the "here-and-now", without regard to either past or future events.

Self-Scoring Directions

For each variable total the number of points that you have written on the blank lines in that section. Then write that sum in the space provided below. Divide the number by the total number of points available for that section (as given below), then multiply by 100 to obtain your percentage score. Plot each of your percentage scores on the graph above. Scores of eighty-five and above are considered desirable.

Variable	Your Total	Divide by	Multiple by	Your Percentage Score
Attitude (1)		60	100	
Motivation (2)		30	100	
Goals & Commitment (3)		30	100	
People Skills (4)		30	100	
Self-Talk (5)		30	100	
Mental Imagery (6)		30	100	
Dealing with Anxiety (7)		30	100	
Dealing with Emotions (8)		20	100	
Concentration (9)		40	100	

Nine Mental Skills of Successful Athletes
Ohio Center for Sport Psychology
Jack J. Lesyk, Ph.D.

Mental Skills

Major Points

Interventions

1. Attitude		
<p>Successful athletes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<p>Learned through:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) role models – athletes, parents, coaches, peers, media b) reinforcement of verbal behavior c) religious/philosophical beliefs 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop awareness of attitude & its influence (self-monitoring) 2. Emphasize that attitude is a choice 3. Use of quotations, anecdotes, stories 4. Identify appropriate role models 5. Identify good examples among peers, coaches, etc. 6. Emphasize “Commitment to Excellence” 7. “Winning” vs. “Mastery”
<p>2. Motivation</p> <p>Successful athletes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 my participation, not the outcome. 	<p>Choose a sport to love. Love the sport you choose.</p> <p>Intrinsic motivation more important than extrinsic. Process is more important than outcome.</p> <p>What do you want to experience? What price are you willing to pay?</p> <p>Elite performance results more from extended, deliberate practice than innate ability.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-assessment of reasons for sport participation and current level of satisfaction (OSSI) 2. Cost-Benefit analysis of sport satisfaction, balance between effort and return 3. Develop support system for difficult times 4. Ongoing self-monitoring

<p>3. Goals and Commitment</p> <p>Successful athletes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<p>Goals provide:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) inspiration b) focus for energy and efforts c) specific actions d) evaluation of effort & results <p>love → desire → commitment</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Written plan for short & long term goals 2. Training plan for each week (self-monitoring) 3. Understand process of goal attainment 4. Performance vs. Outcome goals 5. Three types of competition goals <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. performance b. mental c. experiential
<p>4. People Skills</p> <p>Successful athletes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<p>Cooperation and Competition are both important To develop your support system you must be able to teach others when and how to give you the help and support that you need, especially during difficult times.</p> <p>Develop tactics to deal effectively with those who don't want you to perform well.</p> <p>Learning how to benefit from criticism.</p> <p>Dealing with "what others think".</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify and develop effective strategies for dealing effectively with other people whose influence on you is: predominately positive, predominately negative, and mixed. 2. Basic concepts of effective communication. 3. Concepts of assertiveness 4. Ongoing self-monitoring
<p>5. Self-Talk</p> <p>Successful athletes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<p>We talk to ourselves often, without awareness Self-talk has a powerful effect on:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) thoughts b) emotions c) self-confidence d) concentration e) behavior <p>Self-talk should be carefully chosen in advance.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Awareness of current self-talk in various situations 2. Success seeking vs. failure avoidant 3. Avoiding negative self-suggestions 4. Developing positive affirmations 5. Using cue-words for sport specific situations 6. Attribution of success and failures 7. Ongoing self-monitoring

<p>6. Mental Imagery</p> <p>Successful athletes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<p>We automatically create mental images, then react to them as if they were reality.</p> <p>Negative mental images lead to anxiety, low self-confidence, and poor performance.</p> <p>Positive mental images lead to emotional control, realistic self-confidence, and good performance.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop awareness of spontaneous mental imagery. 2. Success seeking vs. failure avoidant 3. Design specific performance-enhancing mental imagery. 4. Improve ability to mental imagery: short, simple scenes, review then preview. 5. Daily use of performance-enhancing imagery. 6. Ongoing self-monitoring
<p>7. Dealing with Anxiety</p> <p>Successful athletes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<p>Most anxiety is anticipatory and self-inflicted. Anxiety is often a response to one's own words and mental images.</p> <p>Some anxiety may improve performance. Excessive anxiety: impedes performance, spoils enjoyment, causes fatigue, and can lead to injury.</p> <p>What can be learned from anxiety?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Effects of excessive anxiety: muscle tension & distraction. 2. Self-assessment of anxiety situations 3. Anxiety control: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) physical relaxation training b) mental relaxation training c) cue words d) breathing exercises e) pre-performance routines f) mental imagery <p>Ongoing self-monitoring & self-regulation</p>
<p>8. Dealing with Emotions</p> <p>Successful athletes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 	<p>Basic emotions are propensities to act quickly: Anger, sadness, fear, enjoyment, love, surprise, disgust, and shame.</p> <p>Some emotions can facilitate motivation, strength, speed, and concentration.</p> <p>Others can do the opposite. (Loss of control)</p> <p>Emotions lead us to act boldly or timidly.</p> <p>Loving the activity.</p> <p>Passion and desire to perform well.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop self-awareness of what emotions are experienced in what situations. 2. Evaluations of whether these emotions facilitate or interfere with good performance 3. Tactics for self-regulation of emotions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a.) Ongoing self-monitoring b.) Self-talk, cue words c.) Mental imagery d.) Use of support people e.) Simulation training/role playing 4. Ongoing self-monitoring

<p>9. Concentration</p> <p>Successful athletes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<p>Concentration represents the use of all of the other mental skills.</p> <p>Probably the most important mental skill in accounting for high level performance.</p> <p>Sometimes fragile.</p> <p>Concentration can be guided by a “game plan”.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-analysis of concentration in sport specific situations. When is concentration sustained? When is it disrupted? By what? 2. Nideffer – types of attention 3. Flow State - Csikszentmihalyi 4. Concentration exercise tape – theater spotlight 5. Thought blocking – with another thought 6. Thought switching – learning control 7. Cue words 8. Simulation training 9. Ongoing self-monitoring
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Workshop: The Nine Mental Skills of Successful Athletes: A Holistic Model for Assessing and Teaching Mental Skills to Athletes

Presented at the Annual Conference of the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology, Hyannis, MA, Sept. 27, 1998

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This is a practical model for systematically integrating the many diverse techniques used in performance enhancement. The author proposes a hierarchical model in which nine mental skill groups are defined. Both the model itself and the definition of the skills are intended to be easily understood and used by athletes and coaches.

The nine skills are presented in three, sequential levels: Level I - skills that constitute a broad base necessary for achieving long-range goals, learning and developing as an athlete, and sustaining daily practice (attitude, motivation, goals and commitment, people skills). Level II - skills that are used immediately before performance (self-talk, mental imagery), and Level III - skills that are used during actual performance (dealing with anxiety, dealing with emotions, and concentration). Each level incorporates and is based upon skills learned at the preceding levels.

The purpose of the workshop is to introduce this new model to participants and to teach them how to use it in the assessment and planning of mental skills training programs with their own clients. The author has used this model successfully and will illustrate its application with an assessment interview, case examples and audiovisual materials. Handouts will enable interested participants to apply these concepts to their own work. Finally, this model provides a framework for applying mental skills learned through sports participation to other areas of life.