

The Competitive Athlete

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Competitive athletes will tell you that what separates the great hopefuls from the great achievers is the knowledge and [application](#) of mental skills.

A computer with all the gigabytes in the world is useless without the [software](#) to make it run. And so it is with the world class player or Olympic [athlete](#), whose mind is the software controlling that collection of hardware known as flesh and bone and muscle. Aside from their astounding physical prowess, it's the world class players' mental muscles - and how they flex them - that really sets them apart from everyday athletes. In bowling, especially the PBA Tour, you would probably have to add experience to this formula. The difference between you and the other guy next to you is almost completely mental.

Sport psychologists from numerous universities and the Sport Science and [Technology](#) Division of the U.S. Olympic Committee have seen how "mental management" contributes to an athlete's performance. Some of the players/athletes even say it account for 90% of their success. While it's difficult to quantify percentages, we do know from years of research and hundreds of studies just how important psychological preparation is to optimum athletic performance. So much so, it can even conquer the worst of distractions.

Studies over the years confirm that successful players are better able than the rest of us to deal with distractions. Athletes in particular find ways to remain focused on the event, the task at hand to the exclusion of negative influences such as fans, opponents, environment (to include building atmosphere and lane conditions) and even family problems. In 1986 a comparative study in personality and social learning theory, showed that while the vast majority of us spend lots of time worrying about things we can't control, successful players'/athletes' attend primarily to those cues or stimuli that are relevant, or within their control.

And where mental ability counts most is in preparation. The intense concentration or focus "mental management" involves a number of techniques including imaging, comparing performances, positive self-talk, mental relaxation and achieving what players call "flow." And you don't have to be world class player material to benefit from them. While many of us may lack the dream or the gift to compete on the tour, we can still use our minds to improve our sports performance.

MENTAL REHEARSAL, is when players not only picture their movements but imagine feeling them as well. In 1988, Canadian sport psychologists Terry Orlick, Ph.D., found that 99% of the 235 athletes they surveyed rely on this technique to prepare themselves for competition. Studies by the U.S. Olympic [Training Center](#) showed that 94% of coaches use mental rehearsal for training and competition. Players use many devices to see themselves in the act of delivering the ball, maintaining their focus between shots and managing their time while waiting to bowl again. Some may even talk to themselves while preparing by saying, "I want to win this tournament." Then make a detailed plan with contingencies, strategies and coping methods. They take that plan, visualize the whole thing and then enter the tournament with it so that it's running through their head over and over." Some will begin their visualization techniques two days before the tournament, were they see themselves in the settee area, than up on the approach in their stance and beginning the act of the delivery, through the swing motion and posting at the foul line with a good follow through straight at their target. This is all done in preparation that once you are there you don't have to worry about it again. Players have done it for so long that it they even do it subconsciously.

Imagery training, which is part of each player's Psychological Skills Training package, involves the ability to:

- Focus on the most desirable aspects of the performance.
- Emphasize the feeling of the activity by including all senses that come into play;
- Conjure the image several times.
- [Envision](#) the whole environment, including the bowling center or arena setting;
- Incorporate competition strategies into the images.

Each successful imagery trail should be followed by covert positive reinforcement, the combination of trials and reinforcement is critical for the mental skill to work.

- **COMPARING PERFORMANCES** with competitors of the same caliber helps players build confidence. Each time out, practice or competition, you should try to match your mental abilities with the best in the world.
- **POSITIVE SELF-TALK** is another self-esteem builder. This internal dialogue helps athletes assess their performance; they use it to [monitor](#), instruct and encourage. Negative self-talk, on the other hand, is worse than no talk at all. It was founded that irrational beliefs that can interfere with athletes reaching their potential. They include statements such as "If I don't do well, I'm an incompetent person," or "I must do well to gain the approval of others." This can result in emotional distraction and decreased performance. "It's a battle with and within yourself."
- **RELAXATION** is especially important when even the slightest deviation from the norm can throw the athlete/player off. The worst part about poor performance is the stress it creates. The players tend to turn that into muscular tension, which detracts from performance because it disrupts the natural flow or rhythm. Generally, players will use deep breathing to trigger relaxation throughout their entire body in preparation for the next shot.
- **FLOW** sums up the feeling of bliss, euphoria and contentment that athletes feel when they're on a roll, when the physical and mental aspects of performance are completely synchronized. In that state, nothing else, not even the fans/crowd in the stands, matters. For some is like an "out-of-body" experience. It's as if you can't feel your arms or legs or anything and you see nothing but the target, the path of the ball going into the pins, and your body just responds. The relationship between a player's confidence and the challenge being faced is a main factor in determining whether or not the player experiences competitive flow. A study in 1992 interviewed 28 elite players/athletes across seven different sports and found that the key factors contributing to flow are confidence, focus, how the performance felt and progressed, optimal motivation and arousal levels. Also, it was found that players/athletes perceived the flow state to be within their control.

TAKING IT TO THE LANES

You may not have the physical attributes or experiences to perform at the highest level of your sport, but you can get the most out of whatever you do to stay in shape by adapting the same mental techniques players/athletes use.

- **SET REALISTIC GOALS.** Be specific about what you want to accomplish, whether it's striking in a clutch frame or game or making a tough spare to win a [championship](#). Devise steps to achieve the goal and commit to a start-date.
- **BUILD SELF CONFIDENCE** by maintaining a clear and honest inventory of your skills. You're obviously not going to shoot 300 if you haven't been practicing for a long period of time. But you can build on what you have accomplished before and believe in the untapped potential that is yours.
- **RELAX.** There are lot of ways to do it. Think about things that put you at ease. Breathe easily and fully. Picture the muscles in your body as being loose and limber. Conjure up soothing images - scenes that make you feel genuinely good.
- **IMAGINE YOUR PERFORMANCE.** Rehearse in your mind what it will look like and how you will feel as your break that 200 barrier regularly, strike out in the tenth frame, being the tournament leader after qualifying and even shooting 300 in the tournament. See yourself doing it; then do it.
- **POSITIVE SELF-TALK** your way to success. First stop berating yourself for a less than stellar performance. Instead, tell yourself that you will accomplish your goal because you do have the skills to do it and more skills than most to help you achieve it. Keep coaxing yourself. And, above all, listen to your self-talk.
- **CONTROL DISTRACTIONS** by making a quick checklist of everything that might derail you from accomplishing your goal. Eliminate the things you can't control, like the building atmosphere, and focus on those you can, like having the proper shoes or equipment for your sport. Then concentrate on the here and now, because what you do right now and how you do it are the one true parameters of performance.