MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING: An Overview

Chapter Abstract: This chapter is designed as a primer for coaches and parents who lack the basic knowledge of just what mental skills training is all about. The information in this chapter provides basic knowledge for coaches in terms of goal setting, confidence, self-talk, relaxation, imagery, and focusing. These are the basic mental skills that coaches can help their athletes develop.

INTRODUCTION

In the championship match two wrestlers are locked in combat; it’s a vicious back-and-forth battle. Neither man is able to gain an edge on his opponent. Each wrestler possesses equal speed, strength, endurance, and tactical-technical preparation. Victory lies in the balance. Who will win? Likely the wrestler that has greater mental toughness will win; the one who believes in himself and is able to put aside the distractions, the tension, and the doubts and focus on a singular goal. The mentally tough wrestler is more attuned to the opponent and able to anticipate his moves and counteract them. He is able to be taken down and continue to battle. He will be willing to go for victory.
instead of hoping to hang on and not lose it. The wrestler that can focus on outwrestling the other guy in that moment will be victorious.

Most coaches and wrestlers would agree with the previous mental toughness claims. Ask any wrestler how much of wrestling they consider to be mental and the responses will range anywhere from 70 to 95 percent. In contrast, wrestling coaches study technique tapes for hours to keep up-to-date with the latest techniques. And, they will have their athletes spend hours on tactical/technical preparation and physical conditioning in the wrestling room. Yet when it comes to mental skills training, many coaches virtually ignore the topic. Many, in fact, resort to the age-old adage to just “be tough out there on the mat.” And, others believe that “either you have it or you don’t.” These strategies will not bring out the best in a wrestler.

Just what is it to be mentally tough or to exhibit mental toughness? Many believe that being mentally tough means never breaking down or cracking in practice or in competition. That one never quits, regardless of the odds. That one is totally driven with the mission at hand. And the mentally tough athlete is confident and in total control, even when the chips are down.

Dr. David Yukelson, Coordinator of Sport Psychology Services at Penn State University, defines mental toughness “as having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables an athlete to generally cope better than your opponents with the many demands that are placed on you as a performer.” Specifically, he suggests that they must be better than the opponent in remaining determined, focused, confident, resilient, and in control under pressure.

Thus, wrestlers that are mentally tough should have an advantage over their opponent. And, gaining this edge is under the coaches’ and athletes’ control. Wrestling coaches can teach their athletes a variety of strategies to enhance the possibility of their charges becoming more mentally tough. Wrestlers can be taught strategies to build confidence, a key component in mental toughness. They can be taught how to handle the pressure of big matches and remain fully focused on the mission at hand. Wrestlers can be taught skills to help eliminate worry and self-doubt. And finally, they can be taught that failure is only a temporary setback.

Dan Gable, the great Iowa State University wrestler, is often considered one of the greatest athletes and coaches in history. Remember, Gable was undefeated in college until the final match of his career when he lost in the NCAA finals. He used that as motivation to go unscored upon and win a gold medal in the 1972 Olympics. Even the great Gable was not perfect—much like Michael Jordan, who missed 9,000 shots, missed 26 game-winning shots, and lost 300 games. As Jordan said about the subject of failure, “I failed over and over, that is why I succeeded.” Great athletes understand that they must risk failure in order to succeed.

Mental toughness is a necessary component of any successful wrestling program. However, many coaches are not sure where to begin and what to focus on. The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of the foundational mental toughness skills: goal setting, confidence, self-talk, relaxation, imagery, and focusing. This will give coaches the basics necessary to understand and implement the wrestling mental skill drills presented in Chapter 3.
Getting the Most out of a Wrestler’s Potential: 
Goal Setting, Motivation, and Mission

“Once you have wrestled, everything else is easy.” Dan Gable

The growing sentiment from sport science researchers is that to become an expert of athletic technique one needs 10 years or 10,000 hours of deliberate practice. The bulk of these hours should involve the difficult task of repeating technical drills until they are mastered, doing strenuous conditioning and strength training, and rolling on the mat against an equally determined, skilled opponent. This is a lot to ask of anyone. So, understand that all wrestlers are going to struggle at times with the commitment level needed to become experts.

However, if wrestlers can develop a goal which drives them, like Gable at the Munich Olympics, they can commit for the long haul. They can stay motivated and persevere when struggling to reach their dreams. However, it takes a lot of hard work and sweat and a willingness to critically monitor progress every day.

Motivation is key to the hard work needed to be successful on the mat.

To catalyze the dedication of his athletes, a coach must help wrestlers become passionate about a goal: to win a championship, to be their very best, to contribute to the team’s success, or be involved in something bigger than themselves. Goal setting is an essential component of any wrestling program. Yet, many coaches struggle to find the time or to gain the buy-in from their team to consistently set and strive towards goals.

We all, as do most wrestlers, informally set goals for ourselves whether it is to reach for something great or to avoid setting goals at all. The key is to bring the goal-setting process to the forefront of our consciousness and make it work for you and your athletes. Goals bridge one’s current status to his dreamed potential. They provide a road map for success and beacons to focus on when times get tough.

If goals are so important why is it that many athletes don’t set goals? Like many people, goal-setting can be seen as tedious or useless efforts in writing down notes. However, this will often be used as an excuse for something below the surface, they are nervous about making themselves accountable by putting their goals on paper. What do they do now if they fail? Everyone will know. Goals can create anxiety if not approached appropriately.
Therefore, the problem with goal setting is that we are often not taught to set goals that enhance our development and instead our athletes are left to their own devices to try and figure out what they should be shooting for. And, this is a game of chance that should not be played. Below is a list of reasons why goal setting can be harmful to performance if completed incorrectly.

1 **Set too many goals.** Wrestlers get excited about goal setting and then set 12 goals. The problem is that individuals really only should focus on one to maybe as many as four goals at one time. It is a mistake to split the focus in too many directions. Wrestlers will be unable to apply complete energy and attention to any one goal and the quality of effort in towards each will suffer.

2 **Set only outcome goals.** Outcome goals are based on winning and being better than someone else. These goals can be highly motivating short term. However, we don’t have control over these goals, and with a reliance on outcomes to feel successful what keeps an athlete motivated if his or her team is losing, or if he or she is struggling on the mat?

3 **Set the bar too low.** When goals are set too low we achieve them easily and then fail to set another goal that challenges us to continue to improve. Setting goals too low minimizes development. A prime example is the wrestler that has the primary goal of wrestling varsity in his weight class, reaches this goal, and the rests on his laurels in practice because he has not envisioned himself beyond his current situation.

4 **Set the bar way too high.** When goals are too difficult frustration grows and the wrestler is more likely to stop going after them. Many teams suffer from having very challenging season-end goals that fail to keep athletes motivated in the “dog days” when they are tired, injured, or just plain not feeling good about themselves as wrestlers. Difficult goals should be broken down into shorter, more attainable goals that lead to the difficult goal. This allows for constant feedback and a feeling of progress towards the ultimate goal as athletes feel they are improving.

5 **Give up too quickly.** Many athletes write down a goal and then when they don’t reach it in the next practice they give up on it. They must stick to their goals. However, many of us are stubborn and anything short of reaching the goal is total failure. This is an attitude which needs to be adjusted! Wrestlers should think about why they did not reach the goal and then come up with an adjusted goal, a new way of reaching the goal, or recommitting to the already established plan.

6 **Have no goal achievement strategies.** Without a plan how does an athlete know what course is needed to achieve the goal? It is amazing how many times athletes set goals without a clear plan for reaching them. Coaches must facilitate the process of athletes not only setting goals, but coming up with effective ways to work towards them. This, of course, is vital when wrestlers are working out without coaches. What kinds of practices will they have without having a clear goal-focus?

Why should wrestlers set goals if there are many ways that it can be harmful to their motivation and performance? Because the benefits far outweigh the risks, and,
wrestlers must learn that being evaluated and having goals is not a bad thing. It will keep them focused and motivated. It will direct their attention on most important areas to improve, enhance their coach’s opinion of their dedication and preparation, and help them stay on course, learn from losing, and fuel efforts to persevere instead of giving up. Finally, attaining goals helps to build confidence. The world outside of sport forces us to set goals so it’s best to learn effective goal setting in wrestling so it can be used in school, business, and relationships.

Goals as a Window to Long Term Motivation for Training and Competition

We all have tendencies in how we set goals. It depends on our predominant view of success. What does success mean to you? Whether it’s winning, developing athletes, or teaching life skills whatever we initially direct our sights on is usually our primary focus on how we view success. The key is to have wrestlers focus on three different types of goals so that they set themselves up for success in competition.

1 Outcome Goals. Focus is on comparing one’s self with an outside standard such as another competitor, rankings, championships, trophies, praise from coaches, parents or teammates, or accolades in the media.

2 Performance Goals. The standard is comparing the performance against one’s own previous performances. Thus, goals such as scoring the first takedown of the match or getting to one’s feet using a standup from the bottom referee’s position help to keep the wrestler focused on his own performance and getting better. Goal attainment is not contingent on factors outside personal control. Therefore, the likelihood of achieving success and staying motivated is higher. When athletes feel they are making progress they will persevere even if not reaching their ultimate outcome goal yet.

3 Process Goals. These are the “how-to” goals or how to perform and reach the desired outcome. For example, “I will clear my arm on all standup attempts” or “I will keep my head up on my penetration shots.” Process goals are essential for the competitive wrestler because they direct the focus to the “here and now” of competition and to the tactics and techniques needed to be successful. Facilitating wrestler focus on process goals is crucial for focusing on small incremental gains and a focus on getting better every day, especially as it relates to learning from losing.

The fundamental concern with outcome goals is that they can decrease intrinsic motivation to compete. Thus, an outcome goal of paying someone for pins is excellent for fueling short term motivation, but in the long run does not motivate wrestlers to continue competing. This is due first to the fact that outcome goals are not under our direct control. The other wrestler could be better on that day despite an excellent
performance. If the athlete is only outcome focused they will not perceive the good things that were accomplished. In this way they will then only take the bad from the match, not see what they did well, and thus potentially lower their self confidence and motivation.

Using the earlier example of paying for pins will illustrate another issue with outcome goal focus. Outcome goals are extrinsically rewarding. The external reward of money for pins can become the main reason why the athlete wrestles (from an earlier stage where it would have been about enjoyment, getting better, being on a team, etc.). This shift is damaging when payment for pins is removed. Now the athlete is less motivated to continue to compete because the motive previously switched from doing it because they wanted to succeed or for the love of wrestling to doing it for the money. A sole focus on outcome goals also can be damaging because the athlete can perceive external forces such as parental support as contingent on something they don’t totally control—winning. This is why wrestlers should never solely wrestle for their parents. Their motivation will suffer and they may even resent their parents for being the reason they wrestled.

The point here is to not downgrade outcome goals for the sake of performance and process goals. Instead, wrestlers should set all three kinds of goals. Naturally many wrestlers will tend to focus on the outcome goals. Thus, as the coach or parent, you will need to challenge them to set performance and process goals. The athlete that commits to all three types of goals has the pride and desire to win and be recognized for accomplishments, while at the same time understanding that it is important to focus on the daily habits of improvement that lead to the outcome goals. Like Dan Gable, they will be driven to be better than their opponents, but be able to focus on the process and thus persevere despite setbacks. At the same time they will be able to reduce competitive anxiety (e.g., less likely to have doubts relative to uncontrolled standards of success).

In summary, taking into account individual differences, wrestlers should:

- **Have all three types** of goals in their arsenal
- **Focus on performance** and process goals when anxious, when learning from losing, and focusing on techniques and tactics
- **Focus on outcome** goals when flat, fatigued, lazy, or in strenuous training where they need a boost

Earlier it was mentioned how goals are often set in a harmful way. To overcome this it is recommended that wrestlers set SMART Goals.

**That is:**

1. **Specific:** explains exactly what will the wrestler do (I will focus on scoring takedowns using an arm drag setup)
2. **Measurable:** provides a number, quantity, percentage, a numerical marker of knowing if the goal has been met (I will score three takedowns on two different opponents during scrimmage.)
3 **Action Positive**: focuses on what “I will do” versus “I won’t” or “Don’t” (I will be aggressive and score using an arm drag during the scrimmage session.)

4 **Realistic**: is within the person’s reach and yet challenging (If I am a varsity wrestler, I must be able to score on other varsity wrestlers and not just on the JVs.)

5 **Time (frame)**: when will the goal be achieved (In this case during one practice session.)

Applying the SMART principles to goals allows athletes to positively motivate themselves, set achievable goals while pushing their limits, and makes it easier to monitor success. Thus, wrestlers that set these goals will more likely recognize their success on all three kinds of goals because they will not only think about what success would be, but also know how to measure it. And the more often goals are achieved, the more the confidence grows.

In the next chapter we will begin setting goals based on an evaluation of current wrestling performance. We will identify key areas that are strong and not so strong and make those the focus. When finished doing the exercises, athletes should feel they have a better understanding of what drives them, and how they want to reach their goals.

**Believing in Your Mission: Confidence**

While goal setting is crucial to the competitive wrestler, confidence may be the most important attribute needed to succeed. This book’s author Dennis Johnson recalls a story about himself as an eighth grader asking a varsity wrestler a very important question. He asked this wrestler what he thought about in regard to wrestling and why was he so good. His response was that he just watched himself in his mind winning matches...all the time. From that point on Johnson indicated he visualized himself beating the best in the state while he was on a tractor mowing hay or at night before going to sleep. These constant positive visuals led to his confidence. It was not something he was born with but was instead created out of a discipline to use imagery and positive affirmations. He created a vision and believed in it.
As a practicing sport psychology consultant the majority of athletes that meet with me talk about a lack of confidence. While confidence may not be the original reason they were struggling, it most certainly becomes the most significant reason in their perception.

Self-confidence can be defined as a belief in one’s abilities to successfully perform a task or desired behavior. The self-belief wrestlers have to perform on a stage, one-on-one, in front of others is often the deciding factor between winning and losing. He who believes in himself, trusts in his training, his coaches, his conditioning, and his tactical-technical preparation will compete in the moment and not second-guess or doubt as he performs.

**Sources of Confidence**

Where does self-confidence come from? Athletes can gain a sense of confidence from many sources. First and foremost are previous successes. If a wrestler has a history of getting out of tough situations, coming from behind, and getting the job done, they are more likely to have resilient self-confidence in these situations. As I am sure your intimately aware, previous success is the most powerful form of self-confidence. But what if history is not on your side?

Jon Condo, a long snapper for the Oakland Raiders, was a Pennsylvania state wrestling champion in the 275-pound class despite being less than 215 pounds. Dave Caslow, writer for *Pennsylvania Wrestling Newsmagazine* (April 2010) and former Head Wrestling Coach at Philipsburg-Osceola High School, details the story of how Condo bounced back from losing a match to state rival Tim Taylor.

The story is an illustration of two talented and mentally tough athletes who created one of the most exciting experiences of my entire coaching career. During his senior season, Jon moved up to 275-pound class (there was no 215-pound class) but could not get his weight above 211 to 215 because he worked so hard. Jon Condo went undefeated until the Northwest Regional semi-finals, when he lost by a 7-4 score to three-time PIAA state place winner Tim Taylor from rival Clearfield High School. Condo had dramatically defeated the much bigger Taylor in a regular season dual meet to hand the state’s top ranked wrestler his only loss of the year. When Taylor avenged that loss in the Northwest Regional Tournament, he celebrated by blowing kisses to the raucous Philipsburg-Osceola fans. The noisy reaction by the Philipsburg-Osceola fans nearly blew the roof off the Clarion University gymnasium. Taylor followed by winning the regional championship and Condo wrestled his way back to place third, the stage was set for the third Condo/Taylor match at the PIAA State Championships the following week.

One of the local newspapers printed a large photo of Tim Taylor blowing kisses toward the rowdy Philipsburg-Osceola fans while celebrating his regional win. Someone made numerous copies of the photo and posted them in the halls at Philipsburg-Osceola High School. The hype from fellow students, fans and media was extreme! Along with mental toughness, focus, poise and strategy would be necessary for Jon’s mission at the PIAA State Championships. Condo and Taylor both won their first two matches at the state tournament to set up their third match in the semi-finals. Taylor had scored four takedowns over Condo in their first two matches; however, he failed to score any in their state semi-final bout. Condo scored a takedown toward the end of the first period and won 3-2. He went on to win in the finals and finish the season with a 36-1 record. The four wrestlers that Condo defeated in the 2000 PIAA State Tournament eventually won a total of 10 PIAA state medals between them.
Condo’s resiliency is definitely an inspiration for all wrestlers that each match is a new one. If you work hard and believe, you can bounce back!

If a wrestler does not have previous success on his side, say for instance he has lost three times to an opponent prior to their fourth match-up; they must rely on other sources to boost their confidence. Vicarious experience can be an excellent source of self-confidence. If the wrestler can watch video of another wrestler beating their opponent, it can boost their confidence to do the same. Or, they can watch NCAA matches and gain confidence from watching some of the best wrestlers in the world compete.

A third source of confidence is from imagined experience. This, of course, pertains to imagery and visualization. If your wrestler can imagine/visualize himself beating this opponent as Dr. Johnson did as a young wrestler, or at least use imagery to see himself performing well, he will gain a boost in confidence.

Optimal physical and mental preparation is a critical fourth source of confidence. Having an excellent week of practice often lifts the confidence of wrestlers. Wrestlers that are goal-focused, healthy, and feel ready will enter the competition with a greater sense of confidence. The fifth source of confidence is also a component of preparation; physical conditioning. Wrestlers that know they can battle for the entirety of the match, and believe they are more fit than their opponent will have more confidence.

Finally, two other sources of confidence are thinking confidently and verbal persuasion. When athletes use positive self-talk they will begin to be more confident. This includes how they assess their own physiological states (e.g., are the butterflies interpreted in a positive or negative manner?) and emotional states (e.g., when I am angry I perform well). Additionally, when their support sources encourage them, and even persuade that they are capable of the task of beating an opponent, then the wrestler should have a boost in confidence—if the source is reliable and the message is realistic. For instance, Condo may have used the picture of Taylor blowing kisses to the crowd to boost his confidence by thinking he was overconfident and thus vulnerable.

What Wrestlers Attribute Performance to Influences Confidence

How wrestlers explain success and failure has a major influence on their confidence. After an excellent performance if a wrestler attributes his performance to stable (it will be repeated), controllable, and internal factors then he will be confident in his chances of further success. If the athlete attributes failure to stable, uncontrollable factors then he will likely have a decrease in confidence. The message here is that wrestlers should not look at failure as a permanent evaluation of their abilities, nor should they become overconfident because of previous successes. They should look at each situation as an opportunity to compete and not assume victory or defeat. As a coach or parent, if you have a defeated wrestler help him attribute performance to controllable factors like effort, strategy—give him a sense of hope. And, for the overconfident athlete who does not perform to their capabilities but wins anyway, attributions about the subpar performance could be made to unstable factors (e.g., luck, bad performance by
Self-Limiting Beliefs and Harmful Patterns of Thinking

Many athletes believe confidence should be a quick fix. “Give me a mental trick or a magic pill, and I’ll be better than ever.” Sorry, it does not work that way! Confidence is a deep-down belief in one’s capabilities to rise to the occasion; to be able to complete a task successfully. If a wrestler attempts to be positive on the mat, but throughout the practice week visualizes being pinned, losing, or not performing, the likelihood he can trust and focus on the task is not good. That is why it is important for wrestlers to know themselves and take a close look at their self-limiting beliefs. These beliefs are like ceilings. These are the reminders from the dark recesses of the brain saying “you are not good enough,” “you cannot do this,” “it will not happen,” “you cannot make it.” Confident athletes have fewer of these self-limiting beliefs or at least have raised the ceiling on how good they can be high enough that it is not an issue at the current level of performance. An example of having a high ceiling is when the author recalled a time when he was forced to go up a weight class and was about to face a state runner-up. The entire team, including coaches, were sure he would get pinned. However, Johnson had one great move and felt deep down that if he got his move, he had a chance to pin the state place winner and win the match. Although he didn’t win, he didn’t get pinned and went on to a successful season.

These self-limiting beliefs or patterns of harmful thinking do not allow wrestlers to totally believe in their abilities.

Some of the more common harmful patterns of thinking include:

- **Pessimism:** “glass half empty,” always seeing the negative side of things. “I never perform well when my match doesn’t start on time.”

- **Negative Perfectionism:** everything must go right, and if doesn’t it is horrible and I am a failure. A conversation you often hear with perfectionist goes like this. The coach: “Hey, Johnny what do you think about your performance?” Johnny: “Coach, I was not good today. Totally awful.” Coach: “Johnny you lost a close match to the #1 guy in the state. And, you kept good motion on your feet and you had several perfect level changes that led to good penetration just like we talk about in practice!” Johnny: “Yeah, but I still lost. I guess I’ll never be good enough.”

- **Outcome Only:** focus only on winning or being better may lead to stress, lack of preparation, effort, and persistence. “As long as I win it doesn’t matter what happens.”

- **Self-Handicapping:** “this ought to be easy” or “there is no way I can beat this guy.” Predicting one’s chances of success before the competition affects the kind of preparation and focus the wrestler brings to the mat.

- **Catastrophizing:** exaggerating mistakes/losses reduces confidence; “I cannot show my face at school again after losing this match. My parents think I’m horrible.”
• **Poor me:** “coach has it in for me,” the athlete is looking for pity and not taking responsibility.

• **Entitlement:** a belief that you deserve something because of who you are versus your effort or performance. “I deserve this. I shouldn’t have to work anymore to get it. It’s my position.”

• **Unrealistic:** the thought process does not lead to effective focus, “we don’t need to do the off-season conditioning. We can catch up once we get into camp.”

• **Past and Future Thinking:** the focus is no longer on the moment. “I can’t believe I did that” and “If I can only just hang on here.”

When these patterns of thinking become habitual responses then it will be a difficult chore to boost confidence. Often, until athletes challenge these types of thinking for being irrational or just plain damaging, they will struggle to maintain high levels of confidence. They are their own worst enemy.

### Disciplined Self-Talk

The constant stream of things going on in our head, the messages we send to ourselves, is called self-talk. When uncontrolled, as mentioned previously, it can damage a wrestler’s confidence. When a wrestler takes control and begins to use **2P thinking** (positive and productive) he now can focus on the reality of the situation and begin to boost his own confidence.

Our self-talk is tied into all of our mental toughness attributes and skills. How an athlete perceives goal setting will make all the difference if he will buy-in and stay focused. Self-talk also directs our focus. When our self-talk is on something irrelevant or negative then that is where the athlete is consciously, not on performing. And, of course, self-talk has a major role in determining our level of confidence.

When self-talk is unmanaged it has a tendency to focus on judging performances while they are happening. The brain wants to assess its chances of winning and losing (thus why it is important to set process goals to attempt to refocus the mind in the moment). The mentally tough performer is capable of reframing harmful patterns of thinking and refocuses back on what matters most in competition.

The purpose of this chapter is not to present the solutions, only to overview confidence and other mental skills. To help the wrestler stay confident, or regain it, Chapter 3 will present several important confidence-boosting skills including the ability to reframe thinking, thought stopping, refocusing, dealing with mistakes and losing, and **2P thinking** as a lifestyle—not a trick.

### Arousal and Stress Management

Wrestling is an intense, combative sport. Rolling on the mat is not for the faint of heart. Wrestling, then, by its nature, can create a great deal of anxiety and stress. You know that the guy across from you wants nothing more than to pummel and pin you. We have all seen teams and/or individual wrestlers that are about to compete in a “big” match then due to the stress of the situation go out, appear physically exhausted and flame-out with a loss. On the other hand we have also seen wrestlers who were
very loose and relaxed go out and pummel much better wrestlers because of their approach to the situation. Competitors that are able to manage these feelings and fears are most likely to be successful.

**What is Arousal?**

The mentally tough wrestler will have the ability to reach an optimal level of arousal while at the same time minimizing their stress. What is arousal? Authors Dr. Dan Gould and Dr. Bob Weinberg in their book *Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology* (Weinberg & Gould, 2011) consider arousal to be the physiological and psychological activation of a person that falls on a continuum from low intensity (deep sleep) to high intensity (extreme excitement). In laymen’s terms, arousal is the energy we feel that comes from both physical and psychological processes.

Arousal, of course, is critical to successful performances in wrestling. Wrestlers must be aroused enough to compete at the speed, strength, agility, and alertness needed to execute their moves. At the same time, they can have too much energy and be unable to focus their attention on relevant cues like their opponent relaxing after a failed shot as they come back to the neutral position. Or they have way too much “nervous energy,” and burn their energy too early in the competition.

As mentioned earlier, there is an optimal level of arousal needed for success. This optimal level on the arousal continuum, however, is different for each wrestler. Some wrestlers want to be very intense and activated. They are jumping up and down as they are about to step on the mat. Others want to be calmer and are exhibiting almost a peaceful state as they begin the match. I like to think of it as a state of intensity without tension.

Randy Hinderliter, USA Wrestling Gold Certified Coach and Coaches Education and Certification Director from Kansas, shares this true story at his clinics regarding two brothers and their match preparation.

“Years ago I knew this wrestler who was pretty solid. Thirty minutes before his bout, in his pre-match preparation, he would be running sprints. I don’t mean just three or four … I mean 15 or 20 down the longest hallway he could find. Twenty minutes pre-match, he would start beating himself up … he would start slapping himself, his face, his arms, his legs … he would slap himself! This was a red-headed, fair skinned wrestler so when he slapped himself and he would leave red welts all over his body! Ten minutes before the bout, he would put on his headphones and starting bouncing! But when it came “go time” you had
better have yours strapped on because his was … (he was) a three-time State Champ with 125 takedowns his senior year. This was a kid that beginning his 7th grade year, did 100 fingertip pushups every night before he went to bed. He won his State finals as a senior in 47 seconds!

A few years later, I knew his brother. I have asked their parents several times, and they vow that they are full genetic brothers! Thirty minutes before an upcoming match, the brother would be setting in the bleachers doing his calculus homework. Twenty minutes prior, he would put his calculus up and get out his physics homework. Ten minutes before, he would put all the books away, dig out his Game Boy and start playing Tetris. About three minutes before, he would saunter out of the bleachers, do a few ballerina stretches and step to the line. You better have yours strapped on because his was (i.e., headgear)… 257 takedowns his senior year … that led to a State Championship.

I ask, which brother was correct in their preparation? The answer … both! However, if you had asked the older brother to prepare like the younger … or vice versa … neither would have had the success they had (R. Hinderliter, personal communication; July 13, 2010).

The lesson of this story and the key is for each wrestler to determine what level of arousal he needs to succeed. In Chapter 3 the methods for determining this will be presented.

**The Stress Impact**

So, we have defined arousal but what then is stress? Stress is closely linked to our arousal levels and modulates it up and down the continuum. Stress can be viewed as a cognitive appraisal that an imbalance exists between the physical and psychological demands placed on a person, and their perception of their ability to respond to those demands. It exists in situations where not meeting the demand has important negative consequences. For wrestlers, every meet has important consequences, thus the potential for stress is inherent to the sport.

**The easiest way to conceptualize stress is through the following model:**

> Adapted from Weinberg & Gould, 2011, p.82
An example of the stress process would be the demands a wrestler experiences prior to the conference meet. He is dealing with the most important meet of the year to-date, concerned about the partisan crowd of the host team, dealing with borderline grades, and lofty expectations from himself and others around him that he cannot lose. Wow, those are some demands, but not uncommon.

The next step is the tipping point, does the wrestler appraise the situation as something he can cope with or is it beyond his perceived coping ability? If he feels he can cope with the situation, — “What is new? Been here and done that before, — then he will experience little stress. However, if the wrestler has doubts that he can succeed with all of these demands then a more stressful response occurs.

What is the stress response? The stress response is an increase in arousal level (besides other physiological responses) accompanied by doubts and worries. Thus, it is an uncomfortable feeling that can decrease the confidence and focus of an athlete.

In the last stage of the stress process, the wrestler experiences the consequences. If little stress is experienced the wrestler will be able to perform as normal. On the other hand, if experiencing much stress the wrestler will feel tense, uncomfortable and “nervy,” and suffer performance decrements in many cases.

It is important to understand this stress process because knowing it allows coaches, parents, and athletes to intervene in effective ways. For instance, using our previous example, the wrestler could have reduced his stress by doing better in the classroom; something he controls. In contrast, he cannot affect the partisan crowd so he is better off to reframe his appraisal of the crowd noise (e.g., “It gets me pumped when fans are booing”) or not concern himself with it.

**Effects of Stress Physically, Emotionally, Psychologically**

From reviewing the stress process model it becomes clear that wrestlers are constantly being faced with demands. Mentally tough wrestlers will have strong coping skills and an understanding of themselves and when to enact particularly useful skills. A simple way to think about reducing the stress experienced by wrestlers is to look at the sources of stress and determine what sources are under the person’s control and thus changeable. Then, efforts should be made to effectively manage the most significant stress sources that can be changed and also enhance the athlete’s ability to respond in emotionally positive ways. Chapter 3 will illustrate a menu of stress busting strategies that will either change the demands or help the athlete cope with them.
Relaxation under Pressure

Imagine going into Iowa or Iowa State as an opponent and attempting to perform in those raucous conditions. By just being in those gyms with their traditions and the passion for wrestling, the level of intensity and a wrestler’s arousal is going to be elevated. How well the wrestler performs in this environment may hinge on their ability to relax and focus on the job at hand.

If arousal and stress play such significant roles in the success and failure of wrestlers then they must develop skills to manage them. The mentally tough wrestler has the capability to relax under pressure thus reducing feelings of nerves, tension, doubts, and worries. They are able to focus on the task, remain confident even after setbacks, and allow their overlearned skills to be executed almost as if on automatic pilot. Often this is the mental skill that separates the champion from the underachiever.

What is Relaxation?

Relaxation is by its nature a positive sensation. It is a state where an athlete is physically and mentally comfortable, at a low level of tension and stress, and not experiencing stress-producing thoughts. In summary, it is a feeling of peacefulness. It is often used to reduce the high arousal wrestlers experience prior to competition.

Why would a wrestler want to feel peaceful, comfortable, and generally relaxed? The benefits are many ranging from improved health and happiness to reduced stress. Competitively speaking, relaxation allows the athlete to slow down and calm down in a stressful situation. By doing so, the athlete is able to quiet their mind of distractions, focus on the most important cues, react to the surrounding environment versus being stuck in their own head and overthinking the performance, and hopefully get into flow.

Relaxation is a foundational skill for the mentally tough wrestler, and will facilitate the use of other mental skills such as imagery, centering, and focusing. Every athlete should have mastered several ways of relaxing prior to the peak part of the season because as the saying goes “you don’t need it until you need it.” At some point in their careers even the loosest, most relaxed wrestlers can benefit from relaxation. No one is immune to stress.

How Does Relaxation Work?

Relaxation is an effective method for 2P (Positive and Productive) Thinking reducing stress and tension because it leads to physical and mental responses. From a physiological perspective, the relaxation response decreases heart rate, slows and makes breathing regular, decreases tension in muscles, and creates overall calmness. Mentally, the athlete is better able to shift their focus from irrelevant or harmful thoughts and environmental cues to performance-relevant cues and 2P Thinking. Acquiring a state of “relaxed intensity” allows the athlete to think rationally about problems and situations, make better decisions with a focus on options and consequences, and eliminate fear of failure by focusing on the physical sensation of the muscles relaxing and the rib cage moving and/or a mental mantra (such as counting the length of the inhale and exhale cycles).
Forms of Relaxation

When coaches and sport psychologists present the concept of relaxation to athletes they often have reactions that relaxation is hypnosis and meditation, and not relevant. While those are accepted forms of relaxation, there are other forms of relaxation that are more readily accepted by male combat sport athletes. Relaxation can be doing meditation and visualization, but it can also take more active forms like taking a walk, listening to music, doing yoga or tai chi. In Chapter 3 we recommend several popular relaxation strategies that transfer well to practice and match environments. These include deep or controlled breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and centering.

Relaxation as a Life Skill

Many times athletes and coaches consider mental toughness and mental skills training as special topic sessions that can be use as quick-fixes or “tricks.” On the contrary, relaxation (as well as the other mental skills presented in this chapter) should be considered a skill to be trained over a career and a part of a mentally tough wrestler’s lifestyle. How often have you seen wrestlers carry the distractions and stress from the rest of the day into the locker room and on the mat? How have they performed? Probably not well. Wrestlers that can make several forms of relaxation a part of their life, such as going for walks and clearing their mind of distractions, listening to music, and doing deep breathing prior to going to bed, will be able to manage their stress at a lower level. This has very important health consequences but also will enable the wrestler to focus more in practice and matches, and enjoy their sport more. Therefore, do not treat relaxation as something to be used only when an athlete is “stressing out.” Instead, make it a part of a wrestler’s daily habits and he will reap the benefits of lower stress over time that will enable him to manage high stress situations better.

In Chapter 3 you will learn the details of how to do high-quality relaxation, several different types of relaxation techniques, how to transfer for them to pre-match and match situations, and, finally, to make this skill a component of a recovery plan.

Using Imagery to Learn, Prepare, and Compete

Imagery is likely the most recognized technique when people think of sport psychology, and also probably the most poorly or misused technique. What do you think of when someone mentions imagery? Daydreaming? Mystical and not practical? How was it presented to you and how has that influenced your belief in its effectiveness? My hope is that you do not have a less than positive impression of imagery, but these impressions are common because of lackluster experiences with the technique. Therefore, the goal of this section is to dispel any myths about this important mental skill and demonstrate how imagery is a powerful tool that can be used in many ways and in many different situations.

Most wrestlers use some form of imagery; that is they often watch themselves in their own mind executing technique or competing in matches. Dan Gable, in his book Coaching Wrestling Successfully, (Gable, 1999) emphasizes the use of positive imagery as a way to simulate live drilling and as a great source of motivation. Imagery, in fact, has many applications. It can be used as a tool to rehearse technique to prepare for
a drill or as reflection to review task execution and give one’s self feedback on the performance. Imagery also is often used to prepare for competition. Competitors will see the surroundings they will perform in, recreate the feelings and thoughts they will be experiencing, and imagine their game plan and successful execution. It gives the athlete a “been there, done that” feeling when actually entering the situation. Imagery can also be used to review matches and learn from them. Furthermore, imagery is useful in terms of enhancing concentration, confidence, motivation, controlling emotions, and even dealing with pain, injury and performance barriers. Finally, imagery can be used to rehearse routines and the use of mental skills in competition.

What is imagery? It is a re-creation of an experience, or the piecing together of memory pieces to form meaningful images in the mind. While imagery is conducted separate from reality, when done well imagery simulates or closely reflects previously lived experiences as well as experiences coming in the future.

Enough of the scientific jargon; imagery is like daydreaming but with intention. It is done with the purpose of recreating an experience to boost confidence, readiness, motivation, and focus. Imagery is not voodoo; there are a number of studies to show that athletes prefer imagery as a performance enhancement tool.

Author and sport psychologist Dr. Terry Orlick probably explains the importance of imagery better than anyone. “In sport, mental imagery is used primarily to help you get the best out of yourself in training and competition. The developing athletes who make the fastest progress and those who ultimately become their best make extensive use of mental imagery. They use it daily as a means of directing what will happen in training, and as a way of pre-experiencing their best competition performances” (Orlick, 1990 p. 66).

Imagery is more than Visuals

You have probably heard of the term visualization. Imagery differs from visualization because it accounts for all of the senses. Thus, it goes beyond the visual sensory system to include kinesthetic (or movement sensations such as body position, joints, leverage, etc.), auditory (hearing the crowd buzzing and your opponent struggling to get free), tactile sense (the feel of grabbing your opponent in the right place for a successful move), and olfactory sense (smell of the wrestling room). Including all of the senses is important because the athlete wants to create the closest representation to reality as possible. It makes the imagery experience more believable and thus more effective.

Therefore, the key for facilitating effective use of imagery is to use all of the senses. The imagery experience will mirror reality and conjure the emotions and thoughts that accompany the experience. For example, if the athlete wants to have a better performance the second time around at a particularly loud and oppositional gym he should relive the experience via imagery, remember those thoughts and feelings that helped to create the poor performance, and then began to replace them with the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors he wants to occur in his second opportunity.

Imagery Perspective

Imagery success does not rest only on the use of the senses. Its effectiveness is
influenced by many factors including the perspective used by the athlete. An internal perspective is executing imagery from your own vantage point—from one’s own eyes. The performance occurs from a first person view as it would in reality. For example, a wrestler would see his opponent, feel his hands making contact, but would not see his entire body from the outside perspective.

The external perspective, then, is the third person perspective. It is seeing yourself as if you were in the stands or watching the performance on television. Using this perspective then allows the athlete to view his or her whole body in action from a distance.

Which perspective is better? The author noted that he used an internal perspective when developing technique and a movie camera approach when preparing for competition. However, the verdict is still out on this question. What is more important is that both perspectives are used in a way to create vivid, controllable images.

**Vividness and Controllability of Imagery**

Again, the use of all senses is critical to effective imagery. The image experience should create a real simulation. Thus, the vividness of the imagery is important. In doing imagery, wrestlers should pay close attention to the details of their environment such as the facility, surface, and equipment. These details can then be recalled accurately and in living color. At the same time, the athlete wants to also gain a vivid sensation of the emotions experienced as well as the thoughts that are occurring. Further, self-talk strategies can be practiced by using imagery. In Chapter 3, a vividness script is included so wrestlers have a template for creating vivid images.

While the vividness or the clarity of the details is important, maybe even more important is control of the images. Can the athlete make the imagery do what he or she is asking it to do? For example, a wrestler is attempting to use imagery to rehearse a single leg takedown with a head tap setup and a pull-through finish. Vividness will be important for the wrestler to see it, feel it, etc., but also to seeing it accurately, at the right speed, with successful performance of the move. In fact, some would argue that negativity is often imagined experiences that are not being controlled. Imagining the self losing, performing poorly, and responding in ineffective ways disrupts the athlete’s focus, decreases confidence, and does not create a feeling of readiness. Therefore, wrestlers using imagery must practice this technique and master it. Being able to do a positive imagery session (i.e., imagining success against an opponent that seems unbeatable) reveals a great amount of self-belief as well as generates belief. In Chapter 3 a controllability script is provided to assist in the process of gaining control over imagery.
Developing Optimal Concentration: Focusing under Adversity and Pressure

How many times have you told yourself, an athlete, or a co-worker to focus? It is likely too many to count for sure; we use the term focus all the time to describe the need to put our attention into one aspect of our lives intently.

Focus is a critical aspect of wrestling performance. Concentrating on the task at hand makes all the difference in competition. How often have athletes said “I lost my focus,” “I wasn’t focused,” or “I had a hard time concentrating,” after a poor performance? Again, I am sure it is too many to count.

For the wrestler, concentration is a necessity to survive against an opponent that is ready to take them to the mat. One distraction at the wrong time can be the difference between scoring a takedown and being taken down.

What is Concentration?

Concentration is simply paying attention to what one needs to pay attention to. It is focusing mental effort on external and internal events and involves four distinct kinds of focusing:

1. **Selective attention**: focusing on the most relevant cues in the moment that will lead to success.

2. **Maintaining focus over the time needed to perform**: over the course of a match, pre-match, during a tournament.

3. **Situational awareness**: understanding time, place, score and being able to make decisions accurately based on this information.

4. **Shifting focus as needed**: our environment is constantly shifting and the athlete, for instance, must shift as well from pre-match talk with the coach to getting on the mat and performing.

Relative to selective attention wrestlers need to focus on the most important aspects of performance at the time. I have consulted with athletes from many different sports and it is amazing where their focus is at times. Athletes have admitted to being focused during the performance on what is for dinner, who they are going out with later, an attractive person in the stands, or what the coach or parents are thinking.

Athletes should breakdown what are the key focal points during their competition. In matches, wrestlers can view stepping on the mat with an opponent as entering a “dome” where nothing outside it matters or exists. The coach may be the only outside focal point that wrestlers attend to when necessary. Otherwise total focus should reside inside the dome.

Maintaining focus over time is also critical. In wrestling the performance is not overly long, but it is intense. Thus, wrestlers must be prepared for short bursts of highly vigorous, battle-like efforts. Focus does not need to be held for a long time, but it must be held intently for the period needed on the mat. Unlike baseball, golf, and many other sports, wrestlers do not have the luxury to relax their focus. Training should mirror the time requirements needed to focus.
While focusing on relevant cues over a period of time is important, so to is the ability to understand the situation. Wrestlers must know time, place, and score so they can appropriately make strategic decisions. There are a number of situations that wrestlers can utilize in Chapter 12.

The fourth way of focusing is to shift focus. Wrestlers have individual ways of preparing for matches. Some are intensely focused while others are loose and joking around five minutes before. The key for all athletes is to recognize when they need to shift their focus from distracting themselves from the situation to keenly focusing on the task at hand. A secondary part of shifting focus is the ability to refocus when distracted. When an athlete is stressing out about how big their opponent is and the fact he is undefeated, he must have the mental capacity to shift focus from his opponent to his own strengths and the game plan.

The ability to concentrate under pressure is certainly a key mental toughness skill that can be trained. In Chapter 3, exercises are presented to train all four ways of focusing as well as methods for refocusing during competitions.