

Winning the Mental Game: The Power of Positive Self-Talk

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One of the keys to becoming a mentally tough field hockey player is to play the game with a high level of confidence. During my years working as a mental and team building coach, the most frequent request that I receive from players is that they want to learn how to play with more confidence. I view playing with confidence as a choice that you control, but sometimes this is easier said than done. Some athletes frequently base their confidence on how they feel on a particular day or sometimes they believe that they always need to perform well in order to play with confidence. This is ABSOLUTELY FALSE! You cannot base your mental game on your feelings and you cannot let the way you play always dictate how you feel about yourself as a player. If this is the case you will find yourself at the amusement park riding the EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER. I always tell athletes that you do not always control your feelings and that feelings can be very random. A good example is that sometimes you can wake up in the morning and feel like a total loser and you do not have a rational reason for feeling this way.

When you are not playing well, the mentally tough player usually takes charge of her mental game and finds ways to short circuit these feelings of self-doubt. However, how often do you observe yourself or one of your players yelling at themselves on the field? Things like "What am I doing?" "I can't do anything right today!" or simply "I stink and don't belong on the field!" In addition to the negative self-talk this player's body language probably exudes frustration and self-doubt. Whether an athlete is playing well or not, this self berating will inevitably be a distraction and will keep her from playing with self-confidence.

When you give the image of negativity and frustration you are giving your opponent the advantage. By understanding the power of self-talk, one can not only create a positive outlook but also help athletes focus during the most difficult times in a game. Defining self-talk is very intuitive; it is the things that you say to yourself either overtly or covertly. Positive self-talk is used to help motivate oneself and build self-confidence or it can be used as an instructional tool. Examples of positive self-talk would be: "Let's go!" "I want it!" "Eye on the ball," and "Keep moving." Negative self-talk is the counterproductive, anxiety producing, overly critical thoughts an athlete may have. Negative self-talk often stems from unrealistic expectations and irrational thoughts. If an athlete puts herself up on a pedestal and believes she can never make a mistake, it is all too easy to knock them down. Likewise, if an athlete irrationally believes their well being is completely dependent on the outcome of a game and how they play, it is likely this pressure will lead to anxious and counterproductive thoughts.

Here are Some Steps that Promote Positive Self-Talk:

1 Mental Training Log

Before you can help your athletes modify their self-talk, you have to find out what thoughts they are having. This can be done by having your athletes create a mental training log. The purpose of the mental training log is for each athlete to write down everything that happened in her mind during a competition or practice. This log contains the good, bad, and the ugly! All her inner thoughts, fears, and emotional strengths. Your mental training log tells a story of how an athlete, and ultimately as a person, think, react, process, and support her physical performance and competence. Essentially, the purpose of this log is to help you analyze your thinking patterns (their strengths and

weaknesses) and see what thinking patterns lead to a successful performance and what types of thoughts lead to a poor performance. The mental log also builds self-awareness of the mental and emotional beliefs and reactions you carry into the game. It will help you to see on paper what words you say to yourself during the stress of competition. You become aware of when you feel powerful, in control, and at your peak: you also begin to see when you feel powerless, self-defeating, and out of control. The mentally tough athlete is one who has a high level of awareness and has the ability to be her own internal coach. Use the log for at least 3-4 weeks during training for a certain competition. At the end of this period, go back to the beginning of the log and read through your mental process for those weeks. Try to take notice of any patterns. Ask yourself what are the positive thoughts and feelings I had and what did they do for me? What were the negative thoughts, beliefs, and feelings I had and how did they hinder me? Did I overcome these negative thoughts? If so, how? Find out what you do in your mind that helps you perform at your peak. Call to receive a copy of our mental training log.

2 Creating Motivating Statements

If the positive motivating statements are sparse with the players who are just going through the motions, then have them create a list of things that will FIRE them up! The list should be personal and the statements can be just one or two words like "Yea baby," "Quick or Strong," or you can use a short phrase. Often the simpler the cue, the better it is. **Coaches Tip:** Think about a practice or game where you played absolutely awesome. Think of a word or phrase that captures this peak performance. This is your "power word" or word of confidence. During times of self-doubt your power word can bring you back to that state of peak performance.

3 Switch your Mental TV Station by Thought Stopping

Even with a great repertoire of positive self-talk the negatives often still slip in. It's ok, as long as you halt them as soon as possible. Thought stopping is used in three steps: First, pay attention to what you are saying to yourself. Second, when you hear yourself saying something negative to yourself use a cue word like "STOP." Third, replace the negative thought with a positive line. You can also try having the athletes slap the thought away by slapping their leg, snapping it away with a rubber band on the wrist, or hitting their stick on the ground.

4 Changing Negatives into Positives through Affirmations

Affirmations are positive self-statements that you focus on and repeat to yourself many times a day. An affirmation supports the way you want to view yourself and your abilities, or it supports a goal you want to achieve during a specific workout or competition. During periods of nervousness and self-doubt are the times to use an affirmation to change your focus and energy. Affirmations are very powerful weapons you can use to combat destructive self-beliefs and negative self-talk. Affirmations will short circuit the negative self-talk. Examples of affirmations: "I choke under pressure" to "I always come through in the clutch." "When things go badly, I fall apart" to "When the going gets rough, I hang tough." "I can't do anything right today," to "I learn from my mistakes and they make me stronger." **Coaches Drill:** For each negative thought written in your mental training log, write an affirmation to correct the negative. Make sure your affirmations are written in the present tense, are always positive, and begin with "I."

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Write the affirmations that are most important to you and 4x6 index card and place them on your nightstand, on your mirror, on in your locker so you can review them before a practice or game.

5 Countering Irrational Beliefs

It's important to acknowledge that sometimes if you say a positive statement you may not actually believe it. Countering is an internal dialog that uses facts to refute the underlying beliefs and assumptions that led to negative thinking. This dialog will involve the athlete asking herself several questions.

- 1) Is there truly sufficient evidence to prove a negative belief, or more importantly is there evidence that refutes it?
- 2) The athlete should ask what is making them think this and determine if this is rational.
- 3) They should ask if what is wrong is new, and if it is perhaps they can pinpoint the beginning of the problem and
- 4) Finally they can ask themselves what attributes do they have that could counter a true problem they are having with their performance.

6 Do Not Dwell on the Uncontrollables

Do not waste time focusing on things outside of your control. Field hockey is a sport where you do not absolutely control wins and losses. Most of you probably can remember a game that you played or coached where you dominated the other team and you still lost the game. By learning to discipline your mind to let go of the uncontroll-

ables, you will be able to keep your focus positive and in the moment. Remember you can choose how you are going to respond to any situation. The confident player takes responsibility for her thinking and she chooses effective, helpful thoughts in all situations rather than simply letting what goes on around her determine her thoughts. Remember the saying: "Life is 10% of what happens and 90% of how you react to it."

7 Have Positive Focus

Instructional cue words can also help athletes focus for closed skills such as free hits, penalty corners, and penalty strokes. These situations create time to think, which used properly is very beneficial. Unfortunately thoughts like "What if I miss," "I don't want to mess up" "Everybody is counting on me," may appear to distract the athlete. Focus on what you want to accomplish rather than focusing on what you want to avoid. When you say "I don't want to let my teammates down or I don't want to miss this penalty stroke" your body does not respond to the word don't, it responds to the words mess up. As a result you will become more tense and anxious and will not give yourself the best opportunity to perform well. Instead you may want to focus on the process of what you want to do, such as going upper right or making a good contact.

8 Avoid Paralysis by Analysis

Great athletes believe in what they are doing and are confident in their capability to produce. However, too much talk and thinking can become counterproductive. If you over analyze your actions too deeply, this will undermine your confidence and your ability to perform well. Try to keep things simple and use some cue words which focus on the achievement of the skill.

9 Don't Say Don't!

You must Always, Always Believe in Yourself even during the times when one is not performing well. Do not underestimate the Power of Belief. During these times of self-doubt you may have to FAKE IT TO MAKE IT. Muhammad Ali said: "In order to be a great champion, you must believe that you are the best.... And if you are not, pretend that you are."

Any questions or comments about this article contact Keith Waldman at Kperform@aol.com or www.opawinningteams.com

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