Coaches and athletes often attribute competitive successes to mental toughness, but what exactly is that? Mental toughness can be described as a natural or developed mental edge that helps athletes cope better than opponents and be consistent in maintaining determination, focus, confidence and control (Jones et al., 2002). Although coaches often recognize the importance of mental toughness in performance success, they are sometimes uncertain about how to develop and enhance it in their athletes. So how do you develop and enhance mental toughness? In this article, we focus on the four key components of mental toughness: confidence, motivation, focus or distraction control, and arousal management.

The first important aspect of mental toughness is **confidence**, which is the belief in one’s ability to succeed and achieve specific goals. Mentally tough athletes believe that they will be successful in accomplishing their goals. Athletes may derive their confidence from past performance successes, physical and mental preparation, encouragement from coaches and peers, positive self-talk, and seeing others who have similar abilities complete the task successfully. Here are a few suggestions to help you develop and enhance your athletes’ confidence:

- **Re-live past performance success** → Have athletes mentally re-experience past successful performances. Ask athletes to recall how they felt both physically and mentally prior to, during and after a competition in which they performed well. The focus should be on the athletes’ feelings of success and accomplishment because you want to help athletes strengthen the belief that they can and will be successful.

- **Prepare for competition** → Ensure that athletes are and feel well-prepared for competition not only physically, but tactically and mentally. For example, tactical preparation might involve systematically reviewing and practicing different strategies or plays that will be used. Mentally preparing in order to build confidence can include visualizing performance success in the upcoming competition.

- **Give encouragement** → Make sure that your athletes know that you have confidence in them by providing encouragement and support.

**Motivation** refers to the desire to succeed, to push one’s own limits and to come back from setbacks with renewed determination. Dan Gable, World and Olympic gold medal wrestler and one of the most successful wrestling coaches in the United States, has said that, “Every great athlete has fallen short at some point. Great athletes become great because they refuse to let their setbacks derail them from their determined quest to be the best.” Motivation comes from an internal desire to improve and be successful, as well as from external sources, such as scholarships and recognition.

Goal setting is a great way to enhance motivation and help athletes “bounce back” from disappointments or setbacks. Goal-setting should target both mental and physical aspects of sport and should focus not only on the result of great performances, but also on the process necessary to achieve success. Using the “SMARTTEST” system for goal-setting is one strategy for helping athletes establish and maintain effective goals.

Being able to **focus and control distractions** is another essential element of mental toughness. Mentally tough athletes are able to regain their focus after unexpected or uncontrollable events and are able to concentrate on the task at hand despite distractions. The use of verbal cues can be an effective way to maintain focus. Verbal cues are words or short phrases than an athlete can say to him or herself before and during performance to appropriately focus
attention. A sprinter, for example, may need a quick burst of energy off the starting line and say the word “Speed” to herself before the gun fires, whereas a powerlifter who needs to focus his strength before each clean and jerk may shout the word “Power” to himself just as the weight is lifted.

Dealing with distractions effectively is another characteristic of a mentally tough athlete. Some distractions need to be dealt with immediately. Distractions during competition should be dealt with promptly in order to refocus one’s attention. Self-talk can be used to deal with these types distractions. For example, an athlete may feel that the referee is not being fair and instead of focusing attention and energy on that, the athlete would tell him or herself that the referee’s calls are not something that can be controlled, but that what can be controlled is performance and effort. On the other hand, some distractions, such as worrying about an upcoming test or having problems in a relationship, do not need to be dealt with immediately. Creating an “out box” for distractions that can be dealt with later can help athletes maintain an appropriate focus. To make this idea more concrete, athletes can write down their distractions on a note card prior to a practice or game and then place the note card in their “out box,” which may be their locker or bag.

The final component of mental toughness is arousal management. How athletes interpret feelings of arousal, such as having butterflies and feeling jittery, is a key part of mental toughness. Mentally tough athletes recognize that competition anxiety is part of the process and feel confident in their ability to handle it. In fact, mentally tough athletes often thrive on the pressure of competition and challenge. Tiger Woods, well known for his mental toughness, has said, “I always feel pressure. If you don’t feel nervous, that means you don’t care about how you play.” One way to help athletes embrace the pressure of competition is to ask them to re-interpret feelings of anxiety. For example instead of viewing their feelings of anxiety as signs of impending doom (e.g., “I’m going to choke”), ask athletes to think of those feelings as signs of readiness (e.g., “OK – I’m pumped and I’m ready to go”).

Sometime athletes experience anxiety physically. They may have butterflies in their stomach, feel jittery, have muscle tension, or feel like their heart is racing. Physical relaxation is one way to help athletes calm their bodies and reduce some of the physical feelings of anxiety. Progressive muscle relaxation paired with deep breathing, imagery, and cue words can help train the athlete’s mind to recognize sources of tension and then take appropriate measures to relax the body in moments of great stress. Athletes can also become mentally tougher by learning to deal with anxiety through simulated/visualized competitions. Having athletes “see” themselves in the competitive environment, handling all the pressures and performing well helps them feel as if they have “been there before.” Thus, on game day, the amount of anxiety they experience will be lessened.

In the quest for improving mental toughness, coaches and athletes should remember what it takes to develop and enhance the performance and execution of physical skills in practice and competition. Just like physical skills, developing mental toughness requires systematic practice and persistence. So commit practice time to improve confidence, motivation, focus, and anxiety management. If you do, the end result will be well worth it.

References