

# The Mental Edge

*How can you get your athletes to give maximum effort in every aspect of their performance, on every play? Consider the following mental (and life) skills program.*

BY MITCH LYONS

IN MOST ATHLETIC PROGRAMS, coaching is more of an art than a science. Every coach has his or her own strategies, style, and methods of motivation. The common understanding is that there is no “one right way” to coach a team.

But there is one area of coaching that could benefit from more science and less art: teaching athletes the mental skills necessary to succeed in sports. To fully reach their potential, athletes need to be taught how to “think to win” in a structured way.

Through research and trial and error with my own teams, I’ve developed a program for teaching the mental side of sports that I’d like to share with other coaches. Its premise is actually pretty simple: If you teach athletes how to be aware of their thinking process and remain positive in all that they do, their performance will improve.

Most mistakes made by athletes are mental mistakes. When a player misses an

easy basket, it is not because he or she can’t make the shot, but because some mental lapse caused them to not execute at that point in time. When an athlete is not concentrating during practice, it is a mental problem, not a physical one. If you can teach your athletes to recognize this, corrections become more permanent.

As a result, practices are more efficient—players end up learning more in a shorter period of time. And athletes

are more effective during competition. I’ve used the program with teams at many different levels—youth, high school, and college—and I’ve watched these squads consistently give the most effort they can, have fun, and perform better than anyone thought possible.

Here’s the best part: You will also be teaching skills that will help your student-athletes succeed in life. Teaching athletes how to think inside and outside the classroom setting and to be positive even when faced with a pervasive negativity in our society can help them be leaders as adults.

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*Mitch Lyons is an Assistant Coach for Men’s Basketball at Lasell College. He is also the President of GetPsychedSports.org, Inc., a nonprofit corporation based in Newton, Mass.*

## Game of Life

The program I describe in this article aims to make athletes winners both on and off the court. Most of you probably already subscribe to this ideal. We all want to win, but any good coach also thrives on seeing an awkward freshman mature into a confident senior leader.

And we certainly aren't the first generation of coaches to think this way. For example, today, we take the concept of teamwork for granted, but 100 years ago it was a new idea. Back in 1906, Luther Halsey Gulick, the first Physical Activity Director for New York City, started high schools operating sports programs (for boys) because, in his words, "Through the loyalty and self-sacrifice developed in team games, we are laying the foundations for wider loyalty and a more discerning self-devotion to the great national ideals on which democracy rests."

Gulick was amazingly successful. Today, not only do players and members of educational institutions understand "loyalty to the whole," but entire communities support their home teams with abandon. We regularly pepper our speech with sports metaphors because the teamwork lessons in sports are clearly what we experience in our everyday lives.

Gulick's vision also included teaching morals through sports. And while most coaches would agree with the idea that we should be teaching life skills on our teams, this concept has proven more difficult. One hundred years later, we still don't have a standard method for teaching these types of lessons. We point out right from wrong during teachable moments, and we hold our athletes accountable to a code of conduct, but I think we can do more. I think we can teach life skills—through mental skills training—in a systematic way. I think the time is ripe to fulfill Gulick's ideal of using sport to shape society.

Studies in sports psychology say that performance can be improved through building an athlete's self-worth. Our program combines self-talk, goal-setting, visualization techniques, and a positive environment to help athletes enhance their performance in any sport.

These same mental skills help today's young people find the right path and succeed in life. My belief is that low self-worth contributes to many of our adolescents' problems (violence, addictions, eating disorders). We must teach young

people how to find success by building their own feelings of value in our society. If our society's negative attitudes promote feelings of hopelessness, we must teach young people how to create a positive atmosphere in which people flourish and are empowered. Mental skill training fills those needs for your team, your school, and our society as a whole.

## The Program

A main tenet of the program and sport psychology is that people who engage in positive thinking and feel good about themselves will probably perform better in anything they do. But what is not so obvious is that self-worth and positive thinking need to be taught. Helping your teammates, focusing, and even working hard are all skills. They may seem like simple skills to adults, but to youngsters they can be difficult. Thus, we need to teach them, just as we teach sport-specific skills.

Here are the six major skills we teach in the program:

- Give maximum physical effort because when we do we feel good about ourselves.
- Be positive with ourselves and with others because people perform better and learn faster in a positive environment.
- Set written goals because they promote preparedness, which leads to feeling confident.
- Be task-oriented and not outcome-oriented, because our own performance is all we can control and success is more likely when we think about the details than when we focus on the final product.
- Visualize performing tasks successfully outside of practice.
- Meditate to learn how to change harmful thoughts to helpful ones.

You may already talk about these things, but are your athletes getting the message? Is there a text that your players follow? Are they absolutely certain what they are trying to accomplish through sports? Do *all* players on your team understand the concepts?

On the teams I coach or advise, the program starts with a 90-minute workshop where we introduce the principles of the curriculum. Athletes are also given a text to read and are tested on it with a short open-book quiz. By reading and writing about the skills, the athletes better understand their meaning and

importance. We then apply those skills at every practice and game, without fail. We push ourselves as coaches the way we ask players to push themselves.

Of the six major skills, the three we concentrate on most are effort, goals, and creating a positive environment. We work as a team on these areas and also ask each athlete to think about them individually. In the following sections, I'll elaborate on these three points.

## Maximum Physical Effort

Giving maximum physical effort is a mental skill, not an emotional event. While emotion may aid us, we must make the conscious choice to give all the effort we can muster for as long as we can sustain it. The following points are what we tell our athletes and show them in writing:

**Accept** that each practice is a game in itself. The game is, "How long can I keep up my maximum physical effort?"

**Identify** maximum physical effort as if it were a separate goal so that you know how it feels kinesthetically, how it feels emotionally, and what it looks like visually. Identify maximum effort in practice when it is happening so you know what it is.

**Demand** that you make a choice whether to give all you have—or not. Don't kid yourself with your answer.

**Expect** consequences for bad choices that do not fit the identity of the team. Each person on the team has been asked to give something they have complete control over: their effort.

**Ask**, before each drill, "What am I thinking about?" (Answer: My level of effort.) During the drill, when the effort level sags, ask, "What am I thinking about?" Sometimes we just forget to give maximum physical effort as our thoughts go elsewhere, especially during long routine drills.

**Rate** your effort after each drill, individually and as a team, until maximum effort is the rule, not the exception. This means completing each drill all the way through without shortcuts. (Shortcuts do not improve self-worth, but drive it downward.)

**Work** all sides of a practice drill, so it is truly game-like (e.g., the defense on an offensive drill should play as if it were a real game).

**Stop and reflect** on how confident and prepared you feel when you work as

hard as you can all practice, every practice. Stop to reflect on how good you feel as a person after you've worked as hard as you can.

Notice each physical letdown and consciously try to reduce the number of letdowns.

Support teammates, whether you are on or off the court. During games, bench players should help the players in the game achieve the level of effort everyone practices daily.

Naturally, athletes who spend the time and have the commitment toward maximum effort in every practice will play better in games. But more importantly, each member of the team learns how to raise his or her self-worth. They feel more confident and prepared and have learned that hard work has more dividends than just playing better. They respect themselves.

### Writing Goals

Setting written goals is another way to gain self-worth. Before practice every day, each athlete must write down three goals to be worked on that day. Why should you insist that players construct written goals?

1. Scientific evidence shows that setting goals, with a coach's feedback, improves players' performance.

2. When players write down the little things they have to do to improve, they remember them better and make more progress.

3. Setting daily goals helps players transition to practice time. By handing in their goal books as they come into the gym, athletes think about their sport before they begin to practice and clear their minds of whatever they have just been doing.

4. The discipline required to run a play all the way through is the same type of discipline required to bring written goals every day. I have found that if you inform kids of what is expected of them, they see parallels between what they do off the court and what they can accomplish on it. As coaches, we establish discipline in a number of ways, and goal-setting can be one of them.

The type of goals set is very important. Goals should be challenging, yet realistic. They should be performance-related, specific, and quantifiable. And they should be short-term, as we want success every day so athletes can see their own progress.

For example, a goal of "making bet-

ter passes" is not specific enough. Instead, the coach should work with the athlete to discover how to achieve that goal in a more detailed way. If the answer is, "Look at the defense before passing," then that's the goal.

Giving feedback on goals is also important. After the players drop off their goal books and start warming up, I, as an assistant coach, make the time to read their goals, make comments, and try to remember their goals during practice so I can see how they are doing.

### Creating a Positive Environment

Being positive all the time is not easy—for coaches or athletes. Thus, the program actively teaches the mental skill of being positive and demands that coaches model it. Here is what we do to make a positive environment a constant:

- We make sure all athletes understand and accept that people learn faster and perform better in a positive environment.

- We make sure athletes understand that it is a skill to be actively positive. We

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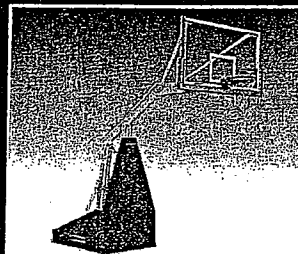
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agree to practice this skill every time we meet and model it for each other.

- We notice and correct negative behavior as soon as it happens in ourselves and others. We make sure it is corrected in a positive way, such as, "I understand your frustration, but stay positive." To encourage this, we notice impatience, sarcasm, negative tone, rolled eyes; and other body language in ourselves and others—then we say something about it.

- We frequently ask ourselves and others, "What are we thinking about?" to determine if we are having negative thoughts that hurt our performance. Everyone practices replacing negative thoughts with positive ones.

- We encourage loud and frequent support from those not in the drill during practice.

- We actively attempt and encourage others to see the good in people, getting past old differences for their own happiness and the unity of the team.

- We teach and model that constructive criticism from others is instruction—it is not about you as a person, but about your play. We recognize defensiveness and practice changing it.

- We acknowledge as a group that the bench has the most difficult job on the team. As coaches, we must take the time to teach them how to be positive without the self-worth gained from playing. For example, have them work on replacing negative thoughts ("Why aren't I playing?") with helpful thoughts ("How could we do that play better?"). My teams have won many games with insights from the bench.

#### Too Much Time?

For those of you thinking this all takes too much time, I can tell you from experience that because players learn faster in this environment, the amount you can fit into a practice increases. More importantly, the quality of the practice improves.

What you will find over time is that

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you are not using more words, just different ones. You can concentrate your critiques on the cause of the error instead of the result, making corrections more permanent. And because the athletes are grounded in the material, they will respond to your coaching much more quickly.

But, beyond this program helping your athletes on the court, it can help create a society that Luther Halsey Gulick began to talk about a century ago, adding in what we now know about

the mind-body connection. If we standardize coaching to include practicing the skill of being positive, millions of young people will become adults who know the power of positive thinking.

Ten years from now, the athletes you have on your team today will not remember the squad's win-loss record. They may not even remember your name. But if you teach them to be aware of how their thoughts affect their performance, they will remember that lesson in everything they do. ■

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