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Mental Toughness

Foundational Principles of Mental Toughness

Sports psychologist Ken Ravizza, Ph.D. addresses the most important mental game concepts from his work of over 30 years with college and professional athletes.

The foundation of my approach to performance enhancement includes three phases. First, provide accurate information concerning the importance, development and refinement of mental skills in performance enhancement. For example, what is the relationship of an athlete’s arousal level to performance? Second, facilitate the practice and refinement of mental skills for use during pressure situations. This is accomplished by developing relaxation and activation techniques that can be integrated into performance. The third and final phase is to support the athlete in learning and refining the mental skills. This requires providing regular, systematic, and ongoing feedback. The athletes must know themselves well and recognize the strengths and weaknesses of their mental game.

Total Person Development

The athlete must be treated as a total person. At times coaches get overly concerned about the technical and strategic aspects of performance and they forget that it is a human being who is performing. Parts of that

human condition are the occasional self-doubts, fears, personal problems, and mental lapses that we all have. The athlete is first and foremost a person who happens to possess excellent physical attributes, but athletics should be recognized as just one of the many things this person does. If the individual can keep the “athlete” part of his/her life in perspective, it helps in maintaining a balance so that her/his whole identity isn’t directly determined by performance. This balance is a necessity if the athlete is going to be successful and maintain some enjoyment for the duration of his/her career and to avoid burnout at some point.

I emphasize the balance between the mental, emotional and physical aspects of performance. The mental aspects are reflected in clear and proper thinking about the performance (strategy and mental adjustments that need to be made during a competition). The mental component is emphasized in the athlete being aware of what is happening in relation to the performance so that, if needed, compensations and adjustments can be made. Also, recognition of one’s ability to concentrate appropriately can be assessed and adjusted as needed. The mental aspects of performance are critical since the athlete must be consistent. This requires the ability to recognize when one needs to compensate and adjust to meet the demands of the situation.

To think clearly and be aware, the athlete must first be in emotional control of himself/herself. Athletes must be in control of themselves before they can control their on-field performance. Just because athletes understand their mental game and can incorporate the mental skills off the

field doesn’t mean they can concentrate in the midst of a tough competition. A coach once told me, “We do all this relaxation in practice but I want them to relax when they are in the game and the pressure is on.” The transference from practicing the mental skills to implementing them effectively when the pressure is on is critical.

This educational and total person approach provides a proactive method to facilitate the athlete’s ability to handle more effectively the multitude of distractions that confront him/her in the pursuit of excellence. It is critical to understand that as an elite athlete, one has limited control of what goes on in the surrounding environment but total control of how he/she chooses to respond to it.

Self control is critical. The athlete must take responsibility to know him/herself and the way he/she experiences pressure and what must be done to perform consistently. Thus, a key concept here is that athletes must take the responsibility to know themselves, the sport they play and how they react in the competitive situation. The athlete needs to take the responsibility for making a personal commitment to excellence. *This concept of responsibility serves as a foundation of my approach. If the athlete fails to take responsibility, then it is impossible to reach his/her potential.* If the athlete recognizes he/she messed up, then it is possible to learn from the mistake. Failure becomes positive feedback when the athlete takes responsibility and adjusts as needed to perform more effectively.

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Religious Rituals Impact Performance

Religious rituals by athletes of faith can promote greater holistic well being (mental, physical, emotional and spiritual) and add significant meaning to life in a way that superstitions can't. The following explores athlete spirituality from a Judeo/Christian perspective, but other faiths can use similar techniques to enhance performance and bring clarity to life off the field. How religious rituals and sports superstitions compare and contrast will also be addressed.

Religious rituals can be defined as “an act or set of acts regularly repeated in a semi-precise manner that symbolizes an “adherents” communication with God. Sports superstitions are “actions which are repetitive, formal, sequential, distinct from technical

performance which an athlete believes to be powerful in controlling luck or other external factors.”

Athletes use superstitions because they believe it helps them perform better. It gives more meaning to their sports activities. With both religious rituals and sport superstitions there exists a sense of reaching out beyond oneself to being aware of the other. The other can be understood as a force beyond human control and comprehension.

Sport superstitions emerge as a result of uncertainty to circumstances that are inherently random or uncontrollable. For athletes who experience pre-game nerves, performing a particular superstition becomes a tool to control their nervousness and alleviate pressure. While this can be a good tool for the athlete, it can also become a scapegoat. If an athlete performs poorly, he or she may fault the superstition instead of taking ownership of their poor performance.

In contrast, the use of religious rituals, especially prayer, has revealed many positive impacts on performance. The use of religious prayer or other rituals alleviates stress and anxiety. There are at least five other reasons athletes use prayer: “As a coping mechanism to help with uncertain stressful situations; to help live a morally sound life; to deepen commitment to their sport for the glory of God; to put their sport in perspective to life; and to establish greater bonds among teammates.”

One of the downsides to sport superstitions is that athletes who use them acknowledge the practice offers no logical progression that aids performance or helps with skills. This sense of being controlled by outside forces may put added stress on certain athletes, while greatly helping others. For the athlete who may already be

under pressure by possibly disappointing parents, feeling overburdened by coach or teammate demands, or they simply beat themselves up over poor performances, their personal disappointment may get even worse when you throw in “not performing a superstition correctly or at all” because the athlete forgot. This can be a recipe for disaster.

For the religious minded athlete, coaches are advised to tell athletes to adopt religious rituals such as prayer or meditation on writing bible passages on their equipment as part of their pre-game preparation.

Research has demonstrated significant positive psychological and physiological effects of prayer, especially to cope with stress and anxiety. Religious rituals have been found to alleviate feelings of losing control during athletic competitions. Many investigations have shown that the use of prayer before, during and after competitions can enhance performance and positively impact emotional well being.

Goals are achieved through a gradual learning process that is both internal and external. The learning process takes place through focus and attention to details, strategic plays, exercise regimens and coaching instructions. Activities, such as prayer and religious observance, incorporated as part of an athlete’s training, helps with skill attainment and paying attention to details. The use of religious rituals improve focus on the task at hand by blocking out excessive environmental stimuli, such as fan activity and disruption activities by the opposition (e.g. trash talk or other means of intimidation).

Additionally, religious rituals add spiritual meaning to life of an athlete

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Championship Performance

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Championship Performance is published monthly (12 times a year).
Subscription rate is \$99.

The purpose and express goal of **Championship Performance** is to help coaches attain the highest levels of success.

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Cubs Use Unique Pre-game Ritual

As part of their quest to win the first World Series since 1908, Chicago Cubs relief pitcher Hector Rondon has a unique pre-game ritual. He puts on the cologne *Sexual Paris* by Michel Germain.

Moments before the start of every game, Rondon spritzes himself with the alluring cologne, covering his neck and chest.

Pedro Strop, who combines with Rondon to form an essential late-inning relief tandem, shares his teammate's superstition. To Strop, the smell of victory begins with the scent of *L'Homme* by Yves Saint Laurent, a bottle of which sits on a shelf in his locker.

"I always say, 'You smell good, you perform good,'" Strop said.

Few athletes go so far as to add perfume to their pregame routine, for the same reason few of them apply hairspray before putting on a cap: It would seem futile.

Relief pitchers tend to be a team within a team. Their lockers are often in the same area of the clubhouse, and during games, they typically share a bench in the bullpen, separate from the dugout. Many of them even walk out to the bullpen together, which for the Cubs has become akin to strolling past the fragrance counter at Macy's.

Odd as it may seem, Rondon and Strop may be onto something. Last year's World Series champion, the Kansas City Royals, featured two players, catcher Salvador Perez and shortstop Alcides Escobar, who wore Victoria's Secret perfume during games. They believed it helped them play better.

David Ortiz, who just finished his legendary career with the Boston Red

Sox, wore cologne during the team's 2013 title run.

"It's the good luck smell," said Cubs catcher David Ross, who played on the 2013 Red Sox.

Germain, the Canadian perfumer, said *Sexual Paris* is not made with athletes in mind. Priced at up to \$84 per bottle, its primary purpose is to arouse members of the opposite sex. But Germain said such **fragrances also instill confidence that can help athletes perform better**, particularly with certain scents.

"Mandarin orange, even a basil is incredible," Germain said. "They're very invigorating."

Cubs manager Joe Maddon is no stranger to the power of smell. In early 2014, while managing the Tampa Bay Rays, Maddon had a problem: His team stunk. To help pull the Rays out of last place, he brought several bottles of old cologne to the ballpark one day and put them on a table for players to try. The team responded with a much-needed victory. "Aroma still matters," Maddon wrote on Twitter that night.

P.S. In a completely opposite ritual, former Giants pitcher Steve Kline had a "dirty hat" tradition in which he would wear the same hat all season without ever washing it.

He took pride in his grubby hat and enjoyed seeing the new depths of filth it could reach by the end of each season. Kline said the dirt kept him grounded and reminded him where he came from.

Winning Ways

■ Make Drills More Effective

When you begin practice drills and explain what is going to take place, randomly quiz players to see if they "got it."

Ask them, "*How are we going to do this drill? How does it work? What are we doing this for?*"

The answer the players give will let you know if they are truly listening or not.

■ Communication Lessons from Rivalry Games

It was the week before a huge rivalry game. One coach spent the week telling his team repeatedly: "Don't turn the ball over. Don't turn the ball over."

The other team practiced a drill repeatedly where all 11 guys on defense chased and attacked the ball in an effort to create turnovers.

The results were predictable. 5 turnovers and a loss by team one. A better communication strategy would have been to stress "protect the ball" and a focus on "ball security" with drills where the runners and receivers have to hold on while the defense tries to punch it out. Stating a negative and expecting positive results is a losing technique. *Telling someone what not to do creates a negative mental image that is difficult to overcome.*

■ 4 Team Enhancers

You'll keep your team performing at its peak when you provide the following:

- 1) **Daily learning.** Stimulate team members to do what it takes to improve. Encourage team members to share and mentor with younger players.
- 2) **Elbow Room.** As they improve in competence, let them gradually take on more responsibility.
- 3) **Support.** Show your players that all the team's work is valuable, even it's not glamorous or doesn't get public attention.
- 4) **Meaning.** Focus on the end result, not the task itself. When summer practices get brutal, some consistent reminders of what the work will lead is always encouraged.

7 Ways Stories Can Inspire a Team

Stories come in all different forms including personal experiences, anecdotes, analogies and jokes. The guiding rule for stories in the athletic setting is to make sure it is appropriate to your particular group. By staying in tune with the mood of your team, you will be able to tell the right story - at the right time - to increase your team's learning of new skills and general overall motivation.

Recommendation: Here are some ideas on how to implement stories into your coaching routine. 1) *Answer player questions with a story.* Questions are good - it means people are thinking. Get players to draw parallels between the story you tell and the questions they are asking. Provide insight and analysis when they don't seem to get the point you are trying to convey.

2) *Elicit stories from the team.* By having the team share personal experiences, they will bond together.

Ask them to be specific and give examples. Wrap common points of their stories together to reinforce your point and possibly make new ones.

3) *Use metaphor or analogy.* Help your team visualize the idea or concept you are trying to explain by using a metaphor from another domain.

Example: Tell a story of heroism from the World Trade Center attack and relate that to never giving up until the final whistle sounds.

This give another "anchor" to help them grasp the concept you are teaching.

4) *Tell a story to change the group's energy level.* There are natural ebbs and flows to a team's ability to pay attention for certain periods of time. A story can help revitalize the group.

5) *Tell a story with your voice and body language.* When you tell a sto-

ry, match the tone and body language to your team's mood. If they are up, get them focused and centered. If they are down, use more movement. People will become more aware of what you are saying through changes in voice and body language. By telling a story in a way that mirrors the emotions of the group, you help get adjust their mood up or down.

6) *Tell a story to change a group's perspective.* Stories will encourage thinking. A group becomes stuck when they are unable to imagine different possibilities. Stories can be a rich source of inspiration that challenge the team to move in new directions.

7) *Throw in a few jokes.* Jokes are a great tool for getting people to be less analytical. It takes the edge off when the atmosphere gets too uptight.

Sell An Unpopular Idea to Your Players

You have just decided to change the practice schedule and now everyone must be here at 6 am instead of 7:30 am. You can bet more than a few team members aren't thrilled with this new arrangement.

How can you make this "medicine" go down a little smoother and actually gain support for an unpopular idea? Here are some suggestions: 1) *Choose a surrogate:* Part of the resistance may be a direct response to you or the way you present the information. If that's the case, you may be better off getting an assistant to be the first "bearer of bad news".

2) *Choose the best time and place to announce the news.* If your team tends to get angry or frustrated as a

group, don't present the information to them all at once. A series of one to one meetings will allow you to address individual concerns while defusing emotional group responses.

Bonus: This will also allow you to be prepared for group objections that may surface down the road.

3) *Begin on a positive note.* Praise the group on something they do well, before going in to why you are making changes.

4) *Trade minor concessions for major support.* You may be able to secure support if you're willing to make minor adjustments to your overall plan. You may resist the idea of "tinkering" with your master plan. However, giv-

ing in to minor requests may help you better sell your idea to the team.

For example, instead of saying "starting next week, practice will begin at 6 a.m.," adjust your timetable to give the team members some time to digest the news.

P.S. Find your biggest team leader and sell the unpopular idea to him or her first, so they can sell the idea to everyone else.

A S.M.A.R.T. Goal Setting Plan

Goal setting can sometimes get boring and not be used to its full effectiveness. A new program called SMART will help coaches and athletes with better goal setting.

Smart stands for:

Specific
Measurable
Attainable
Realistic
Time Bound

The use of such an acronym is helpful in having athletes (especially younger ones) remember some of the key elements within goal setting. Goal setting, done correctly, involves many facets to be truly effective. One can, though, still be effective with focus on the basic elements within SMART goals.

Specific stresses the need to be specific about what one wants to accomplish. The general objective of doing better is fine,

but one needs to get specific - "I want to hit 90% of my free throws," or "I want to hit .325 this season." This specificity allows us to determine precisely whether the goal has or has not been achieved.

Measurable means we can determine whether the goal has been achieved through precise measurement of the target behavior.

Many aspects of athletics lend themselves to being easily measurable (percentage of free throws, batting average, mile time, completion percentage, etc.)

Attainable means that the goal is reachable. Setting goals that are too difficult is a recipe for failure, subsequent disappointment, and potential dropout. Our goals should be difficult, but challenging. Too easy and we get bored. Too difficult and we don't succeed and drop out.

Realistic is a cousin of attainable, but focuses on a reality check that the goal is one that can be reached with hard work

and proper training strategies (incorporating physical and psychological skills).

Time bound emphasizes the need to identify within what time period one wishes to achieve one's goal. Do I want to increase my bench press from 200 to 300 pounds within one month, six months, a year? How about dropping my mile time from 4:15 to 3:59.9 - how long will that take? What is my target date? The time element helps us develop our short-, intermediate, and long-term goals to better train to achieve the goals we have set.

Goal setting can improve performance, if we go about it the right way and do it the SMART way.

Excerpted from the book "Championship Performance Coaching Volume 2: 101 Practical, Proven Sports Psychology and Team Building Strategies to Achieve Your Dream Season" www.championshipperform.com/championship-performance-coaching/

Five Rules for Praise Motivation

When you praise athletes all the time and for any reason, the tactic can actually backfire. If you hand out praise the wrong way, at the wrong time, or for the wrong reasons, it can do more harm than good. Here are some guidelines to follow when using praise to motivate athletes.

1) *Be very specific about when you praise.* Don't say: "Bill you're doing a good job - keep up the great work."

Wait for something very specific to praise. For example, "Bill, you did great job blocking out Smith the last game. Keep that up and we'll be in great shape."

2) *Do not praise ordinary performance.* If you praise athletes for doing routine task

they will not be motivated to get better. If and when they do something better than ordinary, the praise won't mean nearly as much.

3) *Don't praise hit and run.* When a player does something truly excellent, call that player aside and spend some time letting that person know what his or her performance means to your team's long-run success.

Consider praise in front of the group, but don't over use.

4) *Use praise to improve poor performance.* If an athlete is doing well in one area, but poorly in another, use praise to improve the poor performance.

Sit the player down and privately praise what he or she is doing right. Then say, "Now I want you to take the same approach on this other situation."

5) *Never assume praise is enough.* If an athlete consistently delivers superior performance and work ethic, praise in and of itself is not enough. Other forms of appreciation are absolutely essential at some point.

Excerpted from the book **Championship Performance Coaching Volume 1: Legendary Coaching Wisdom on Leadership, Motivation and Practice Plans to Achieve Your Dream Season** www.championshipperform.com

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A major part of success of a team, or of an individual, has a great deal to do with the intangible qualities possessed. The real key is in how a person sees himself (humility), how he feels about what he does (passion), how he works with others (unity), how he makes others better (servanthood), and how he deals with frustration and success, truly learning from each situation (thankfulness). **Dick Bennett, College Basketball Coach**

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Handling High Expectations

Note: the following report is addressed directly to athletes.

Having high expectations can affect your confidence. When you fail to reach your expectations, confidence can take a hit when you question your ability. In addition, if you believe you cannot perform to others' expectation, you will experience a greater degree of pressure and anxiety during competition.

Lower confidence produces:

- Self-doubt.
- Fear of making mistakes.
- Focus on negative aspects of your game.
- Under-performing during games.

Maybe a coach has talked to you about your potential and told you that they believe you are on the verge of a breakout season. Possibly your coach talked to you about their expectation to lead the team to victory or improved stats. Even though your coach believed in you, you just didn't share the same level of confidence in your ability.

These high expectations can cause you to feel a lot of pressure to perform. After all, you didn't want to let your coach down.

So you may focus on trying to make some of the weaker aspects of your game into strengths in attempt to rise to your coach's expectations.

Despite your desire to please your coach, game after game, your performance suffered.

Former high NHL draft pick Nail Yakupov understands the effects of trying to live up to high expectations and the effects on confidence.

Yakupov was drafted as a teen and had the future of a franchise hoisted upon his shoulders. The expectation to perform and rescue a franchise is a difficult challenge for any player.

After four sub-par years with his former team, Yakupov was traded to the St. Louis Blues. He is faced with

the challenge: Will the trade serve as a fresh start or will the trade become a further blow to Yakupov's confidence?

St Louis Blues' head coach Ken Hitchcock plans to set Yakupov up to succeed and foster his confidence. The plan for Yakupov is to improve his confidence by allowing him to play to his strengths.

According to Hitchcock, "We're going at it different than most people think, and that is he has a skill set and we want to enhance the skill set. The stuff without the puck, it's going to take time, and we're in no hurry. We're not going to turn a player into a defensive specialist. We want to take what his strengths are and get him to really focus on that, and the other stuff is teachable, and we'll work with him on what he does well every day so he has the confidence to perform at a high level."

By focusing on strengths, athletes foster confidence.

Aren't you more confident when you think about all the things you do well?

Recommendation: Here are two tips to improve confidence:

1) Let go of strict expectations you feel others have for your performance. You cannot control the expectations of others but you can create your own personal goals to guide your athletic actions.

2) Focus on your talents and strengths, not shortcomings. This is a matter of knowing your strengths, maximizing your strengths and game planning to take advantage of your strengths in competitions.

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■ Peak Performance Bullets

■ Strengthen Your Glutes for More Speed and Power

Glute muscles are the pelvic stabilizing muscles in the buttocks that keep your hips and pelvis properly aligned during exercise. Strong glutes can be key to preventing injuries, including knees. They also generate power for push-offs and sprints.

Here are three great exercises for athletes to use to strengthen glutes. 1) **Plyometric Jump Squat:** Stand with your feet shoulder width apart. Squat, bending knees to 90 degrees. Jump explosively up and land softly in the squat position. Land with your knees bent; keep your weight back and over your heels. Repeat.

2) **Plyometric Lunge:** Also called a split jump, the plyometric lunge targets muscles in the legs, hips, buttocks and abdominals. Stand up straight with right foot forward and both knees slightly bent. Lower your body until your right thigh is parallel to the floor and the leg is bent at a 90-degree angle. Spring upward and quickly switch legs, landing gently with your left foot forward; immediately lower into a lunge again. Spring and switch legs once more. Repeat.

3) **Burpee:** Stand with feet hip-width apart, arms by your sides. Lower into a squat position and place your hands flat on the floor behind you. Jump your legs back so you are in plank position, lower chest to the floor and push back up, then jump your feet forward into a squat position before jumping straight up to stand. Repeat.

■ 12 Key Traits of Winners

A survey of past Super Bowl MVP's asked what the 12 most important ingredients necessary for success at the highest level of football. Not surprisingly, of the dozen traits of a champion, seven were mental. Heart, Poise, Passion, Leadership, Confidence, Perseverance, and Discipline were all listed along with Talent, Strength, Skill, Speed, and Strategy.

How does your team measure up on these key areas?

Foundational Principles of Mental Toughness, cont.

A more advanced aspect of responsibility is for the athlete to increase his/her level of awareness so that, instead of merely going through the motions in training or practice, he/she becomes more aware and takes charge of current status and readjusts to meet all the performance demands.

The Importance of Awareness

Being in control allows the athlete to first assess the situation and then choose the appropriate resources or specified mental skills to effectively deal with the situation.

1) First, how do athletes appraise or think about the situations in which they find themselves in during a competition (or practice)? To reach a state of 'clear and effective thinking,' the athlete must determine what can or can't be controlled and then use mental skills to manage the situation in an effective manner.

Example: A baseball pitcher may be ready to perform but there is a rain delay. At this point, he has a decision to make. He can either get upset or he can use the time delay to his advantage (i.e. do some imagery, just relax and recognize that the delay affects everyone and can be used to his advantage to take control of his response to the delay). For these reasons the athlete and I spend time discussing the role confidence and clear thinking plays in enhancing performance. We discuss the concept that "attitude is a decision" and that we choose the attitude we want to have. It is easy to have a confident, productive attitude when things are going well. The athlete must learn to deal effectively with the immediate situation when adversity arises (as it happens in most competitive situations.)

Example 2: A hitter in softball is behind in the count; no balls, two strikes. She can choose now how she wants to think about it. **She can either take a negative mental approach ("This at-bat is over.") or a positive one ("I have seen two pitches and now I am ready to make solid contact with the ball.")**

The athlete's appraisal of the situation also helps her evaluate the performance.

Failure is positive feedback. The quest for excellence is filled with a multitude of distractions, pitfalls, hassles and difficult experiences. As athletes learn from failure, it only helps them get stronger. I want to teach athletes to be more systematic and thorough in their performance evaluation so that the important lessons can be pulled out of the experience. I often say, "You spend countless hours of your life playing this game, so *what did you learn today* to take that small step toward your championship or other athletic dream?"

Helpful tip: I often encourage athletes to *write about their performance* because this helps them to learn, then let go of the experience, and not dwell on the negative aspects of it for an inappropriate amount of time.

2) Second, awareness is important so that once the athlete effectively appraises his/her responses, they can apply a wide range of mental skills or resources to cope with varied skills in practice. Quality practice and training are critical because athletes must learn to work on their skills in practice in order to develop confidence in their ability to handle adversity during the pressure situations.

Coaches really appreciate this aspect of my approach because it reinforces the importance of increasing the quality and intensity of practice. When practice is perceived more like the game, then performance during competition can be viewed as similar to doing it just like practice. So the bigger the contest, the more important it is to just do what you do in practice and training. Of course this requires more intensity in practice, which necessitates intent or mission and a present orientation during the executing of the task.

Example: During practice, it would be better for the athlete take five quality plays/ reps instead of 15 plays/ reps where he or she is just going through

the motions. This approach provides the athlete with more confidence and also reinforces consistency. **With less but higher quality reps, they are aware and focused on concentrating so they can make the most out of the drill** or practice routine.

Awareness is a phenomenon that occurs in the here and now. The emphasis is on the process - not the end result. Why is the emphasis being on the process? Because this is where a person has control. So often the athlete becomes obsessed with the end result and loses focus, tries too hard and gets distracted by something over which he or she has no control.

Example 2: A pitcher in a pressure situation must pitch one pitch at a time instead of trying too hard to win the game. So often when the going gets tough the pitcher tries to "bear down" and attempts to strike the batter out instead of making one good pitch, and hit the mitt, pitch by pitch. This type of focus takes self-control and self-discipline as the athlete attempts to remain focused on the process. This same "one play at a time" concept is also applicable to football, volleyball and any other sport where play stops and starts.

The final component of awareness and clear thinking is the ability to trust your skills and training when it is actually time to perform. From my work on peak experiences in sport, the athletes kept reporting, "I was in a zone, I was just doing it." It was like they did the preparation and now they could just "let go" and execute. Some athletes describe this feeling as an "effortless effort." Self-awareness is the key concept that can help form a foundation for the mental abilities to respond to the demands of the situation.

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Religious Rituals, cont.

that superstitions can't. They give personal meaning to theological concepts and help connect athletes to God on a more meaningful level.

Making a sign of the cross before a game, displaying religious symbols in the locker room or on their person, or asking for God's help in moments of tension and difficulty are ways athletes can make God present in their daily lives.

When confronted with adversity on or off the field, some athletes will ask existential or spiritual questions. During these times, religious athletes "give glory to God", believing that not only in sports, but also in life, a person of faith trust that nothing is too trivial to bring to God. The use of religious rituals helps athletes recognize their smallness in the ultimate scope of the universe, which also can have the added benefit of keeping them humble.

Praying to Win. Most religious scholars would be against "praying to win". When athletes ask for divine assistance or prays to win, they are in essence asking God to favor one side over another. To think that God would favor any one of those who claim to be "His children" over others is morally problematic. Psychologically speaking, it may also cause losing athletes to experience spiritual and existential crisis as well as elevated anxiety regarding their relationship with God as they wrestle with the question: "What did I do or fail to do to deserve this loss?"

To the extent that athletes ask for God to bring about a desired outcome, these type of prayers should be discouraged. Instead, the intention of prayers should be shifted from getting an unfair advantage to praying for help to give his or her best effort.

There are three mental game aspects of sport where an athlete's faith and

religious practice can have a positive impact on athletic performance.

1) *Self-talk and confidence building.* In helping religiously motivated athletes deal with a lack of confidence, the Bible can be helpful. Some athletes may not be comfortable with some positive "self-talk" that makes everything about themselves. However, they may draw strength and greater confidence from Bible passages such as Philippians 4:13 which says, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." Or Joshua 1:9 - "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

Instead of prayers for victory, religious minded athletes can understand they are seeking divine help to play their best. This sense of divine within themselves helps them form constructive and nonjudgmental self-talk. In very practical terms, when the athlete is analyzing his or her own performance, rather than becoming overly self-critical, the athlete should simply "describe and correct their on field behavior."

Example: A golfer struggles to hit out of the rough. Judgmental self-talk might be, "This is the worst part of my game. My bunker play sucks." A descriptive assessment might be, "Next time, I'm in the rough, I will keep my head down."

The goal is to encourage confidence within the athlete by relating confidence in one's ability to strength drawn from their faith in God. Bible passages such as the one's quoted above help remind athletes that they possess the strength to face whatever adversity comes their way. From this vantage point, he or she can proceed to correcting or adjusting athletic behaviors knowing God has entrusted them with athletic skill and that they

are imitating Christ when they are giving their sport total effort.

2) *Diffusion of worry through prayer.* When an athlete brings their fears, worries, and concerns to God through an active prayer life, they can use their faith to calm nerves and sharpen present moment focus.

A Bible reference that is helpful would be Philippians 4:6-7 which states, "Don't worry about anything. Instead, pray about everything and in doing so, you will experience the peace of God which passes all understanding." Another is Matthew 6:34 - "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

Here, the athlete is not asking for victory, but rather seeking to attain a sense of inner calm and peace that keeps worries in check. If the athlete is "dialed in" to what the Bible says about worry, anxiety and fear, they will get that sense of peace the Bible speaks of.

3) *Improving Teamwork.* When prayer is used as a religious ritual, bonds between teammates can be improved. When players see each other as created in the image of God, they are worthy of respect and conflict lessens.

Conclusion: Athletes who participate in religious rituals rather than sport superstitions will see greater benefit. It is consistent with human nature to seek meaning for all the activities we pursue in life and religious rituals provide meaning in a sense that superstitions can't.

Excerpted from the Sport Psychologist Journal. Volume 27, Issue 1. Paper by Anthony Maranise, Bishop Byrne High School. Published by Human Kinetics. www.humankinetics.com

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