

Physical – Technical – Mental – Emotional – Part 3

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**“The happiest travelers are the ones
Who roll with the punches.”**

Once a level of understanding and experience with the physical and technical aspects of a sport is attained, the athlete then runs into the “other” side of the sport when they notice that their confidence and competence in practice fail them in competition. Welcome to “the mental game” as it is so often called.

Many people understand the importance of “the mental game” yet have limited understanding of its many facets and how to go about improving. There two major areas: mental and emotional. The mental components provide the foundation while the emotional aspects provide the inner strength and resilience to reliably and consistently thrive under pressure with confidence, capability, and deep enjoyment.

Mental

The mental aspects of sport are numerous. Some of the most important foundations are goal setting, mental rehearsal, mental activation level (called arousal level in the literature), self-talk, and attention control. This list is by no means comprehensive and merely provides a foothold into the topic. Additionally, we will address emotional aspects in the next installment.

Many athletes groan at the mention of goal setting. It can be a dry exercise, seemingly with no purpose. However, merely showing up to practice and shooting will not allow an athlete to grow and thrive to the degree that they wish. Any challenging journey needs a plan or roadmap. A good goal set that is frequently maintained and modified as the athlete grows provides direction and motivation.

A good set of goals addresses desired outcomes, over which the athlete has no direct control, as well as performance (behavior) components, over which the athlete has or can learn to have direct control and which support the outcome goals. This difference is critical to understand and consider. If the athlete puts all his or her “eggs in one basket” consisting only of outcome goals, there is great risk of devastating failure from which the athlete cannot recover. (It is painful and heartbreaking to experience – or witness.)

Performance (the doing, not the score outcome) is vitally important and must have at least equal emphasis as outcome goals. These performance goals support the desired outcome goals, and interestingly are goals unto themselves from which the athlete may draw great satisfaction when they are accomplished.

The goal set also involves specific actions and task activities. These action or task goals support the performance (behavior) goals. Most short term goals are action goals. Most outcome goals are long term goals. A mature goal set includes all combinations of outcome, performance, and action goals with short, middle, and long term time frames.

Mental rehearsal, often called imagery or visualization, is a very powerful skill that can be developed through understanding and practice. The term mental rehearsal is preferred over imagery or visualization since many people do not “see” images or visualizations and since the most important aspect of mental rehearsal is recreating the internal “feelings” of the activity in order to “experience” all aspects of the activity on one’s mind.

True performance comes from deep within the “deeper part” of the mind rather than from the highly verbal “active thought” part of the mind. The former is where our best performances come from while the latter becomes an interference and obstacle once the athlete is past the initial learning phase of a specific activity or skill.

The “deeper part” of our mind cannot distinguish the difference between performing an activity and mentally rehearsing the activity. Thus, for training our mind, mental rehearsal has the same benefit as actual training. Certainly we must also train in order to build physical and technical capability and familiarity; however mental rehearsal allows us to perform even more “training” of our mind. Ultimately, in competition, it is our mind which decides the outcome.

Mental activation level is a way of discussing how “hyped up” an athlete is when performing. When an athlete is too calm, their performance is sub-par. Conversely, when an athlete is “hyped up” too much, their performance also suffers. This latter condition is quite common!

For each athlete, there is an optimal level of mental activation for a given activity. For most people, having some adrenaline (not too much!) and excitement puts their mind and body in an optimal state for performance. The senses and mind are on full alert, the body is able to respond, and the athlete discovers new levels of capability.

When one is too hyped up, knowing how to reduce the mental activation level is a powerful tool in the competitor’s toolbox. One technique is to gently deep breathe, also known as belly breathing. If athletes have learned and trained this technique, it is a physical thing they can decide to do right in the heat of competition which will calm their body and their mind. This has the added benefit of quieting all the chatter going on in their head. After a pause to belly breathe for several breaths, the athlete may then regain an appropriate mental activation level, refocus, and go back to work. Another technique is to pick out a tiny item and quietly stare at it for a minute. Pick out something tiny, such as a spot on the back of your hand or arm where a single hair comes out of the skin. Stare at it. Soon, one will become less excited and again the chatter will subside. Then rest your eyes while you set up for the next shot, and enjoy.

Learning how to increase or decrease one’s mental activation level, and then learning one’s personal optimal level, will allow an athlete to perform much better with increased enjoyment.

Self-talk is all the things we say to ourselves as we shoot. Too often, these things are critical, negative, counter-productive, and unfriendly. In training, when I see athletes visibly react to a shot they don’t like, I will sometimes ask them if they would like to share what they just said to themselves. Their facial reaction is often hilarious! Universally, they do not want to share what they said. I then ask how they would feel if I had said the same thing to them. They always say they would be very upset with me if I had. If we are supposed to be our own best friend and supporter, why are we so harsh to ourselves?

Remember how the deeper part of the mind cannot distinguish between mental rehearsal and actually doing an activity? Another interesting aspect of the deeper part of the mind is that it

only processes positives. That is, it does not understand negation. When someone says “Don’t shoot an 8!” the deeper mind hears “Shoot an 8!” This is not helpful!

“We do what we say and we become what we believe.” Self-talk is a form of mental rehearsal. What are you telling yourself about yourself? Is it positive? Is it constructive? Is it taking you in the direction you want to go? Become aware of what you are saying to yourself, stop when you catch it happening, and turn it around to positive things. Instead of “You stupid idiot!” after a bad shot, one might be better served with “I over held, forced the shot, and didn’t reject decisively like I know I can. I will allow the shot to unfold and reject if it doesn’t happen soon enough or if it isn’t unfolding properly.” This is much more helpful and affirming for the next shot and for the athlete’s overall development as a competitor.

Attention control is another important aspect of high performance. Where are we mentally focused? Is it helpful to us? Anything in the past or future (even if only a second or two in the past or future) is not helpful. We need to be only in the Present Moment and focused only on the task at hand.

Often, when athletes look around during a match, they are told “Don’t look back, keep looking forward, keep your head in the game.” One international athlete told me that she would look around on purpose so that she could resolve any curiosity (“Who just walked on the range?”), let the thought run, and then refocus without distraction. Just because an athlete does not look around doesn’t indicate where their attention falls.

Let the distracting thoughts run so they can dissipate, breathe to become relaxed and quiet in body, mind, and spirit, refocus, quietly pay attention (without control or judgment) to what is happening in the Present Moment, and allow yourself to perform a shot process.

We have touched on only a few of the myriad aspects of the so-called “mental game” in this article. The books “Body Mind Mastery”, “Extraordinary Golf”, and “Sport Psychology and Competition – The Psyche of the Shot” listed on the Resources page of my blog are excellent references.

In the next installment of this series, we provide a short overview of the emotional aspects of high performance and thriving under pressure.

The “On The Firing Line” series is published by the national governing bodies for Olympic shooting in Japan and the USA, and has been adapted for archery as “On the Shooting Line” published by USA Archery. Olympic Coach Magazine, the National Association of Soccer Coaches, and others have referenced selected articles. The entire series is available online at www.pilkguns.com.

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