



Building Mental Toughness

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I recently had the privilege of coaching alongside some old teammates at a volleyball tournament. While in the huddle between sets, the coaches asked the girls what it would take to win the game. In my head, I rattled off pointers on defense, zones to target for serving, and open areas on the court for hitting, but instead I was surprised by the girls' responses. They mentioned having the right mindset going into the game, having a positive attitude, and being a supportive teammate. This team had been coached all season not only on the physical skills of the sport but also strengthening their mental approach to the game.

Training, coaching, and playing sports is an ever-evolving art with more light being shed on the mental aspects of the game today than ever before. The development and physical skills are still vitally important to success but building the mental toughness of an athlete and a team can be a significant differentiating factor.

Here are some strategies to build the mental game:

Visualization: Closing your eyes and imagining the game in detail helps to control and condition first your mind and then your body for success.

Positive Self-Talk: Before being a good teammate to someone else, you have to think about how you communicate with yourself. Instead of negative self-talk during a game or practice, think of words of encouragement, positive affirmations, and highlight your successes.

Routine and Preparation: Work to develop a pre-game routine and pattern for yourself and your team to build consistency and reduce anxiety. This can be a specific meal, a body warm up or stretching sequence, a playlist to listen to, or even the same clothes you wear.

Mindfulness and Breathing: Controlled breathing and elements of meditation slow down the heart rate, reduce anxiety, and center the mind. In moments of high stress or tension in a game, breathing is a simple act to focus on and center yourself before your next move.

Goal-Setting: Goal setting for mental toughness is beyond how high you can jump and winning a game but instead it is a focus on process-orientated goals over outcome goals. Examples of process-orientated goals can include making 100 left-handed lay ups in practice or running a consistent 6:30 pace for the first two miles of a race. These goals are focused on the action of development and not the end result.

Reframing Mistakes: View setbacks and errors as opportunities for learning and development. Think about what to change in your approach and what you can learn to improve upon for the future.

Whether you have tried some of these strategies before or are looking for a new coaching angle, think about these intentional strategies to build the mental game, find what works best, stay consistent, and build upon it.

(‘Train your mind as you train your body for race day’, Mayo Clinic Health System)