

Farres, L. G. (2003). Preparing mentally for competition. *Best Practices Quarterly*, 19(1), 8-10.

Preparing Mentally for Major Events

By Laura G. Farres, Ph.D., Ch. P.C.

Learning how to perform optimally for major competitions or events can be a challenge. There are often numerous distractions and unique circumstances surrounding most major competitions and these elements can pose challenges to focus, confidence and mental readiness. There are several strategies athletes and coaches can use to prepare mentally for major events in order to maximize performance.

Preparation Before the Event

Mental preparation is a process that involves learning about and developing relevant mental tools and then practicing the tools in practice and competitions settings to find the appropriate process for each athlete. It takes hard work and a commitment to practice, reflection and adaptation for athletes and coaches to find the right recipe for success. There are several elements to consider in the preparation phase.

1. FundaMENTAL strategies

Leading up to a major competition it is important to provide individuals with the mental tools so that they can learn to manage their own performance and create their optimal level of mental readiness. Strategies such as goal setting, imagery, thought management, and emotional control can be learned through practical exercises that incorporate these elements into athletes' practice and daily routines. Athletes can then use these tools to develop their personal routines and plans for achieving mental readiness for competition. These plans can be refined and adjusted during the pre-competition phase as athletes engage in practices, tournaments and competitions leading up to a major event.

2. Developing Refocusing Strategies

Athletes and coaches should also learn to apply the tools to develop refocusing strategies for challenging and unexpected events arising during their performance. Coaches at this stage can often facilitate athletes' use of refocusing strategies by structuring challenges within the practice environment or by simulating competition conditions. Athletes' personal routines and their process for achieving optimal mental state are foundational elements of the mental training process. It is from this foundation that athletes can begin to explore focusing and refocusing beyond the context of the performance and apply their plans to deal with elements within entire competition event itself.

3. Anticipate and Plan for Distractions

An additional part of the preparation for a major competition involves anticipating potential distractions and impediments to performance and focus. There is significant power in having anticipated an event before it happens. If something occurs that has already been identified, then energy and impact of the element is lessened and an awareness of alternative responses to the situation heightened. Plans need to be established ahead of time for how to deal with the major distractions. Moreover, athletes need to have a general strategy for identifying and coping with the unexpected.

One suggestion might be to develop a chart to analyze and prepare for difficult conditions. Athletes and coaches can brainstorm a list of competitive and/or event-related conditions and for each condition consider the following:

1. The most challenging possibility (e.g., not playing as much; family and friends having unrealistic expectations of athlete's performance);
2. The best way of preparing for it (e.g., clarify team roles and expectations; outline goals/expectations with family and friends)
3. How the condition might serve as an advantage (e.g., chance to watch other teams weaknesses; opportunity to communicate competition needs to family and friends).

Teams can then examine the probability of the event occurring and the possible impact the event might have on performance. Elements that have a high probability and high impact need to be explored further and specific plans devised.

4. "Less is More"

In the final stages of preparation for a major competition, it is important to adhere to the "less is more" attitude. The tendency is to want to over-prepare for the event by squeezing in a number of competitions and practices as the event approaches. Athletes need to be well rested and mentally relaxed prior to the major competition. Their mental and physical resources need to be high in order for them to perform at their best. Moreover, major changes or adjustments to training, performance or personal routines should be minimized at this point. Small refinements may be necessary but the key is to stick with the elements that have been working. Often this "minimalization" is achieved with a simple tapering plan, but it is important that both coaches and athletes are aware of the concept and mindful of its implementation.

Similarly, often prior to major events, athletes may experience additional tension or worry surrounding the event and linked with individual and team expectations. Athletes and coaches need to incorporate strategies to remain relaxed and confident in the final few weeks prior to the event. Issues and concerns needs to be addressed and plans implemented to effectively cope with the challenges. Refocusing strategies, relaxation training, goal setting and event planning can have a significant impact in this regard.

Preparation at the Major Event

There are several things that athletes and coaches can do to prepare while at a major event. The strategies are aimed at creating confidence and focus for athletes and coaches within an unfamiliar and potentially stressful setting.

1. Come with a clear performance goal in mind

Athletes should come to competitions with a clear goal in mind related to their performance. There is a significant difference between having an event "Performance" and an event "Experience". An event "Performance" implies a clear focus on the task at hand and a commitment to choices that will give the best possible chance for optimal performance to occur. Conversely, an event "Experience" implies taking in the sights and sounds around the performance without a clear goal or focus during the competition. Ultimately, it will be important to find a balance between the two and allow opportunity to absorb the event atmosphere. But to succeed on a performance level, teams will need to direct their focus completely on the task. Orlick (2002) suggested answering the following two questions to strengthen confidence and belief and help direct focus at this point:

- Why can I – develop a list of reasons why the individual or team can achieve the goal they have set out.

- How I will – identify how the goals will be achieved during the event and what specifically has to be focused on to achieve those goals.

2. Get familiar with the surroundings

Athletes and coaches should also take steps to familiarize themselves with the surroundings and with everything that is important to them specifically: Find the cafeteria or nearest food outlet, identify a meeting place at the venue, explore the distance from the accommodation to the competition venue. Personalizing particular areas can also help. Bringing things from home, placing posters or team slogans in sleeping areas or dressing rooms can help create feelings of comfort, familiarity and a sense of control. Visiting the competition venue prior to the event can also be beneficial. It helps athletes and coaches get used to the surroundings and any nuances surrounding the facility. If there is opportunity, it can also be beneficial to access the venue when there is no one else around. This opportunity can provide athletes with a chance to walk through or think about their pre-competition plans and preparation strategies within the physical setting. They can also imagine themselves performing while in the venue thus creating feelings of familiarity and comfort before competition even starts.

3. Prepare a daily schedule

Daily schedules are another useful tool for athletes and coaches to use while at an event. The schedule should be written out and posted and a copy given to each person. Part of mental preparation is knowing what to expect throughout the course of the day and written schedules can facilitate that preparation. Knowing specific times for such elements as team meetings, free time, and family and friends, allows athletes the opportunity to fit their personal preparation plans within that schedule. Similarly, it promotes a focus on the present which can be very helpful during a major competition. While at the event, it is easy to get caught up in all the distractions and elements surrounding performance. Knowing when things are going to occur allows athletes the opportunity to focus on exactly what they are doing in the moment rather than wondering when a particular event is going to occur.

Similarly, it is important to prepare for significant down time during a major event. Often at major events there are periods of time where athletes will have nothing to do. It is important to prepare for those times by considering things that can be done to stay relaxed, comfortable and engaged without having to think about the competition all the time. Books, movies, or games are some ideas of activities that should be preplanned to facilitate optimal performance states. There may also be “hurry up and wait” times. These are instances where there is a significant urgency to get some place only to arrive and realize there will be a long waiting period before the scheduled activity. Athletes and coaches that are prepared for these moments and try and use them in an effective and positive manner will maximize their energy by minimizing the potential irritations that arise from such situations.

4. Stick with routines and plans

It is also important to remember to stick with regular routines and plans. A tremendous amount of time and effort will have gone into team preparation. Individuals and teams need to be respectful of this preparation and adhere to the routines and plans that have been devised. All too often, individuals will move away from the very elements that they have worked so hard to establish and then are confused as to why their performance has altered.

5. Expect the unexpected

At competition events, athletes and coaches also should expect the unexpected. Things never go exactly as planned. It is inevitable that something unexpected or unusual will happen. Both athletes and coaches need to maintain a sense of humour or achieve a level of perspective when things out of

the ordinary occur. At these times it will be useful to utilize preplanned refocusing strategies. Further, some crisis or setback is also likely to arise during the event. During those times, it will be important to problem solve and find alternate ways to push through the issue. Open communication between athletes and coaches will be important at this point. Lessons need to be drawn and adjustments made to maintain and regain mental readiness and optimal focus.

6. Schedule physical and mental recovery opportunities

A final suggestion is to provide ample opportunity for both physical and mental recovery and regeneration over the course of the event. Athletes and coaches should have concrete strategies to relax or to shift their focus away from performance and competition. Reading books, listening to music, meditating are just a few examples of strategies used to take mental breaks and reenergize the mind and body. Most major events last over several days and it is important to manage the emotion and excitement over that period in order maintain a consistent level of energy over the long haul. Proper recovery is also about appropriate choices. Athletes and coaches need to be mindful of the choices that will facilitate their performances versus take away from the ability to achieve the performance goals that have been set out.

Conclusion

There are several strategies that athletes and coaches can utilize to feel better prepared for a major event. The key is to have a clear goal for the event, adhere to personal plans and preparation strategies, stay in the moment, and minimize the impact of distractions. Remaining positive and optimistic even in the face of adversity and managing emotions daily are addition strategies that can make a big difference once competition arrives. For the teams who are prepared for the experience, a major competition will provide an exciting opportunity to showcase their ability and an important learning opportunity and preparation for future major events.

Resources

Butler, R. J. (1996). **Sport psychology in action**. Oxford, England: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Gould, D., Greenleaf, K., Guinan, D., Dieffenbach, K., & McCann, S. (2001). Pursuing performance excellence: Lessons learned from Olympic athletes and coaches. **Journal of Excellence**, *4*, 21-43. Available online: <http://www.zoneofexcellence.com/Journal.html>

Gould, D., Guinan, D., Greenleaf, C., Medbery, R., & Peterson, K. (1999). Factors affecting Olympic performance: Perceptions of athletes and coaches from more or less successful teams. **The Sport Psychologist**, *13*, 371-394.

Miller, B. (1997). **Gold minds**. Ramsbury, England: The Crowood Press.

Orlick, T. (2002). Excelling in the Olympic context. **Journal of Excellence**, *6*, 5-14. Available online: <http://www.zoneofexcellence.com/Journal.html>