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Conditioning the athlete

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Three-time Olympian Lynn Jennings once said: "Mental will is a muscle that needs exercise, just like muscles of the body."

According to leading sports psychologists, Jennings, a long-distance runner who competed in the 1988, 1992 and 1996 Games, is absolutely right.

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"Physical practice is key to being successful as an athlete," said Michael Sachs, Ph.D., sports psychologist and professor of kinesiology at Temple University in Philadelphia. "But there are limits to how much physical practice you can put in. Supplementing it with mental practice makes it more likely to achieve performance goals."

And that practice itself has a goal - learning to be mentally tough.

"Every athlete has a piece of toughness," said Jenny Susser, Ph.D., sports psychologist, and clinical psychologist of the Women's Sports Medicine Center at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City.

"You need to be mentally tough to train hard because it hurts. And oftentimes, as a growing athlete, you make more mistakes than you don't. Frustration and injuries happen, and you've got to be tough to keep going."

"No one can win all the time. But you've got to learn from all you do - both successes and failures. Always do a self-assessment," Sachs said.

"You want them to work on performance mastery," he said. "One of the best ways to do that is to teach them about attribution. To what do you attribute the success or non-success of your performance?"

Some athletes, he said, choose to dwell on external factors.

The puck took a weird bounce, the officials made a bad call or the coach blundered. But it's the internal factors that set the regular athlete apart from the star athlete.

Both Susser and Sachs offered some questions an athlete might use in conducting a self-assessment: Did I perform at my best for this moment in time? Where was my lapse? What do I need to do better?

By requiring athletes to assess themselves, they learn to critically evaluate their performance and learn what aspects worked, what didn't work and what needs to be improved. This, in turn, augments mental will and toughness, allowing them to remain focused on their own performance rather than merely winning the next competition.

But there's another element to mental toughness, according to Dan G. Tripps, Ph. D., director of the Center for the Study of Sport at Seattle University.

"Athletes need to control their focus," he said. And they can do this by controlling external distractions.

Athletes must learn to focus as necessary, blocking out crowd noise and other disturbances that might disrupt concentration.

But learning how to focus well takes years of practice and experience, Tripps said.

The same kind of patience is needed for mental imagery, a process in which athletes visualize themselves winning.

Robert Troutwine, Ph.D., a sports psychologist for dozens of NFL teams and universities and professor of psychology and business at

William Jewell College in Missouri, offered some techniques to hone one's ability to use mental imagery.

"It's almost like meditation," said Troutwine, founder of Troutwine & Associates, which offers clients a variety of services aimed at improving athletic performance. "Athletes should picture themselves executing their sport and should always picture doing it right."

He also suggested watching video clips of all-time great performances by Olympians and professional athletes, as well as playing the mental and video images in slow motion.

"The effects of mental imaging can include calming the body's physiological arousal, improving mental practice [and] increasing confidence. In general, it helps one's control over thoughts, emotions and physiological responses during competition."

Susser had one complaint about the technique, however.

"Athletes don't do it enough," she said. "They'll start a week or so before the competition, but not use it in between. But if they're struggling with a new move, they could use it there. It's really golden if you use it in your training."

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