

# USING YOUR HEAD TO PLAY CHAMPIONSHIP BASKETBALL

A basketball player's  
workbook for  
developing  
mental  
toughness

By Dr. Alan Goldberg



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# I N T R O D U C T I O N

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In every sport at the highest levels the very best athletes always say the same things when they're asked about the secrets to their success. You have to develop good mechanics and proper technique. You have to have a solid tactical and strategic understanding of the game. You have to develop and maintain a superior level of physical conditioning and fitness. Lastly, and surely not least, you have to have your head on straight at crunch time. What this last secret is all about is that if you want to take your game as far as possible, if you want to play at the next level, then you can't do it by simply just training your physical dimension. You also have to train mentally. You have to develop mental toughness.

Let me put it in simple terms: Do you really want to play to your potential? Do you have some big, scary dreams that you would desperately like to achieve? If so, then understand this: Your success in this endeavor is at least 95% physical and 5% mental **IN PRACTICE**. Simply put, this means that there is no substitute for hard work and perseverance in the pursuit of your dreams. To reach them, you have to **PAY YOUR "PHYSICAL DUES" IN PRACTICE**. There are **NO PHYSICAL SHORTCUTS** to becoming a champion. NONE! However, once you step onto the court for a game, once you step onto the court at an important tryout or showcase, once the pressure of competition is turned way up high, then your success is now 95% **MENTAL** and only 5 % physical. What this means is also very simple to understand. When it comes time for the game and all the hard work is behind you, whether you play your best or stink the place out depends almost entirely upon what is going on between your ears!

To become a champion you must **TRAIN** like one. You have to be willing to do whatever it takes **PHYSICALLY** to get yourself to the next level. There is absolutely no substitute for consistent, honest, hard work. Hanging around in front of the tube spilling snacks and soda on your face won't get you there. Cutting corners in your training and consistently dogging it whenever the coach isn't looking won't get you to the next level. You'll never reach your basketball dreams with those kinds of training behaviors. Success can only become yours when your investment of physical training in practice is consistently solid.

However, once you get into pressured tryout or game situations, the physical side of your sport becomes much less important. At games, your performance is 95% mental because what goes on "upstairs" determines whether you soar with the eagles or gobble with the turkeys.

Your focus of concentration, ability to handle pressure, "rebound ability" from mistakes, terrible calls and bad breaks, your self-confidence and mental toughness will all determine whether your hard work, consistent training and skills will pay off in a well played game. In other words, without having a "good head" on your shoulders, you'll consistently fall short of your goals.

All too often basketball players will do what they need to do physically in order to get good. They'll religiously work with a trainer, practice long hours shooting, passing and dribbling, study the game's strategy, build up their endurance through sprints and distance running as well as work on their offense and defense. In practice their hard work is clearly visible. They handle the ball well and play quick and strong. By game time there's no question that they are physically tough and ready. However, to play your best when it counts the most you need more than just this physical preparedness. You also need to be ready mentally. You need to be **MENTALLY TOUGH!**

If you go into your big games, critical tryouts or important showcases **HOPING** that you'll perform your best, **HOPING** that you'll make the team or **HOPING** that you'll impress and not embarrass yourself, then you're setting yourself up for some major heartache and disappointment. If you go into these situations worried about another player, dwelling on a previous bad performance, distracted by a lousy warm-up or just plain doubting yourself, then you will **NEVER** play to your potential.



**DON'T** waste all of your hard physical work and conscientious training! DON'T leave your mental toughness to chance. No serious basketball player would ever leave his/her physical training, ball handling and shooting to chance. That would be totally foolish. So why leave such an important component, the mental side of your game out of the equation? Since your focus of concentration and ability to stay calm and relaxed under pressure are absolute keys to playing well, why would you then go into a big game too nervous and/or focused on all of the wrong things? Well, you wouldn't if you had trained **PROPERLY!** To play like a champion you must systematically develop the mind of a champion. This workbook is designed to help you do just that: **TO THINK AND PERFORM LIKE A WINNER ON THE COURT WHEN IT COUNTS THE MOST!**

The techniques, strategies and exercises found in this workbook are **GUARANTEED** to help you stay calm under pressure, concentrate like a winner, avoid psych-outs and intimidation, block out distractions, quickly leave disappointments and bad breaks behind you, feel confident, believe in yourself, master last minute negative thinking and self-doubts and much more! If you **WORK** these techniques and **DO** this workbook, then I can confidently guarantee that you will significantly strengthen your level of mental toughness. If you simply read through this book once, like you would any other book, then you will find what you read to be relatively useless in the long run! Why? Simply because this is a Workbook, NOT a READ book. I **KNOW** all the techniques and strategies that you'll find within these pages work BECAUSE I've "borrowed" them from basketball players and other elite athletes through the years. However, in order for you to get them to consistently work **FOR YOU**, in order for you to truly build the skills of mental toughness, you must **CONSISTENTLY WORK** them!

# SO HOW TOUGH ARE YOU?

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## TESTING YOUR CURRENT LEVEL OF MENTAL TOUGHNESS

So let's begin in the beginning with exactly where **YOU** are at mentally. Are you a mental toughness giant, or a "98 lb." mental toughness weakling? Let's find out. Take this very simple, mental toughness questionnaire to determine exactly where your mental strengths and weaknesses lie. Having an **AWARENESS** of your present strengths, and, more important, your current weaknesses is the very first important step to developing the mind of a champion. After completing your mental toughness training in this workbook I would then recommend that you retake this same questionnaire. This will demonstrate how far you've come mentally and what other work is still needed.

## **A BASKETBALL PLAYER'S MENTAL TOUGHNESS: Questionnaire**

### **HANDLING PRESSURE**

*(true/false answers)*

1. I often dread playing in those bigger games
2. I think about my opponent's size, skills or reputation before I play
3. Away games, court conditions, crowd size and specific opponents usually affect my game performance negatively
4. I look forward to the bigger games/tournaments
5. The tougher the competition and the better my opponent, the happier I am
6. I am inwardly calm and composed before I play
7. I worry a lot about others outplaying or embarrassing me
8. I frequently play better in practice than I do in big game situations
9. I have the ability to calm myself when I'm too nervous
10. I get physically sick before certain tryouts/games/tournaments
11. My pre-game self-talk is mostly negative and full of doubts
12. I have trouble trusting my training and skills when it comes time to put it all on the line
13. I play better against weaker opponents
14. Some people on my team would call me a "head case"
15. I want to be the one taking the "game winning shot"
16. More often than not I'm too nervous to play to my potential
17. I seem to often get outplayed by players who I know I'm better than
18. I frequently get sick or injured right before bigger games/tournaments
19. I'd much rather practice than compete
20. "Choking" under pressure is a close friend of mine
21. I tend to play better in half court or pick-up rather than full court games
22. I can never seem to make my hard work and extra training pay off

## CONCENTRATION

- 23.** I am easily distracted
- 24.** I often focus on other players before the start of my games
- 25.** I often think about past poor performances before I play
- 26.** Once the game starts I tend to focus too much on everyone else
- 27.** I think too much when I play
- 28.** I have the ability to block out negatives & doubts before the game
- 29.** I usually only focus on one or two things when I play
- 30.** I tend to compare myself with my opponents/teammates during the game
- 31.** I worry a lot about letting others down
- 32.** I can easily lock my focus on the game as I play
- 33.** My mind has a tendency to drift too much before games
- 34.** I focus a lot on the outcome before and during the game
- 35.** If I have a bad warm up I can't seem to play well
- 36.** I mentally jump ahead of myself during the game and entertain thoughts about the "what if's"
- 37.** There are certain opponents/teams that I can't seem to play well against
- 38.** I tend to get distracted by what others say or do before and during the game
- 39.** When I lose my focus I can quickly bring it back
- 40.** When I play, I mostly don't think



## **HANDLING ADVERSITY** (Mental Rebounding)

- 41.** I can't seem to shake the disappointment of a bad game or poor shooting night
- 42.** I have certain games each year where I always perform poorly
- 43.** If my first few shots are bad, the rest of my game is bad
- 44.** I usually believe that a bad warm-up will negatively affect my play
- 45.** If I make a mistake, it stays with me a long time
- 46.** Disappointments and failures motivate me to work harder
- 47.** I have the ability to quickly let go of my mistakes
- 48.** When I get called for a foul, I can't stop thinking about it
- 49.** When a call goes against me and it's unfair, it sticks to me like glue
- 50.** I believe that I learn much more from my failures than successes
- 51.** Injuries make me want to pack it all up and quit
- 52.** If I make several mistakes in a row, I get discouraged
- 53.** Losses and setbacks make me feel like I'll never succeed
- 54.** With all my failures I often question why I keep playing this game
- 55.** I deliberately use the memory of bad games to push myself harder in practice on a daily basis
- 56.** When the going gets tough, I tend to quit
- 57.** After a failure or bad game, I look for what I can do better next time
- 58.** When bad things happen, I always think, "why me?"
- 59.** If I've been outplayed by certain players/teams a few times before, I tend to give up too easily when I have to play them again
- 60.** When I fail, there are usually correctable reasons for it.

## **WINNING ATTITUDE**

- 61.** I tend to see the glass of milk as always “half full”
- 62.** I believe that I can do anything that I set my mind to
- 63.** I build my successes on my failures
- 64.** Other’s negativity always seems to get to me
- 65.** When I play badly, I tend to make excuses
- 66.** I hate playing on certain courts and against certain teams
- 67.** The more of my teammates I can get to play harder, the better I feel
- 68.** I love being pushed by my coach
- 69.** It really annoys me when my teammates push me harder in practice
- 70.** I like to pace myself through a long practice so I don’t get too tired
- 71.** It really bothers me when I see teammates cut corners
- 72.** My coach would call me a whiner
- 73.** When I play badly at the big tournament it’s usually my teammates,’ ref’s or coach’s fault
- 74.** “Can’t” and “never” aren’t words in my vocabulary
- 75.** If I can’t be the star, there’s no point in trying hard
- 76.** I have an easy time finding things to complain about
- 77.** I am a positive person
- 78.** I tend to get threatened by other’s success
- 79.** I live, “when the going gets tough, the tough get going”
- 80.** If you don’t have anything good to say, don’t say anything

**SCORING:** Score one point for each answer that matches the answer on this scoring key.  
If your answer doesn't match, assign a value of zero.

KEY							
HANDLING PRESSURE		CONC		HANDLING ADVERSITY		WINNING ATTITUDE	
1)	F	23)	F	41)	F	61)	T
2)	F	24)	F	42)	F	62)	T
3)	F	25)	F	43)	F	63)	T
4)	T	26)	F	44)	F	64)	F
5)	T	27)	F	45)	F	65)	F
6)	T	28)	T	46)	T	66)	F
7)	F	29)	T	47)	T	67)	T
8)	F	30)	F	48)	F	68)	T
9)	T	31)	F	49)	F	69)	F
10)	F	32)	T	50)	T	70)	F
11)	F	33)	F	51)	F	71)	T
12)	F	34)	F	52)	F	72)	F
13)	F	35)	F	53)	F	73)	F
14)	F	36)	F	54)	F	74)	T
15)	T	37)	F	55)	T	75)	F
16)	F	38)	F	56)	F	76)	F
17)	F	39)	T	57)	T	77)	T
18)	F	40)	T	58)	F	78)	F
19)	F			59)	F	79)	T
20)	F			60)	T	80)	T
21)	F						
22)	F						

## SCORING – MENTAL TOUGHNESS QUESTIONNAIRE

There are a total of 80 possible points that you can get on this little test. If you answer these questions honestly and score between 72-80, then you are mentally tough as nails and should be traveling around the country with me conducting mental toughness workshops. If you score between 64- 71, then you are pretty solid mentally. Scores between 56-63 indicate that you are weak mentally and scores below 55 suggest that your head is definitely getting in the way of your playing.

Examine your answers in each of the four categories listed for directions into which area of mental toughness training you need to work on improving. For example, if you score 14 out of a possible 20 on the “handling pressure” section, it would be very useful for you to spend more time on these techniques in this workbook. Keep in mind that no matter what your score, you can **ALWAYS** strengthen your mental toughness muscles and that’s what this training program is all about.



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GOLDBERG – **SO HOW TOUGH ARE YOU?**

## S T E P 1

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### GETTING STARTED

#### STEP 1

**DEVELOPING AWARENESS** – In order for you to learn to do your best when it counts the most you must first develop **AWARENESS** of what you are currently doing mentally that may very well be getting in your way. You can't correct mistakes and strengthen weaknesses without knowing exactly what these are! You started this process of developing awareness by taking the Mental Toughness Questionnaire. Hopefully this has given you some general ideas of what exactly is getting you into hot water, performance-wise. Now let's get a bit more specific. Remember, **WITHOUT AN AWARENESS OF YOUR MENTAL MISTAKES, YOU'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO BEGIN TO BUILD MENTAL TOUGHNESS. AWARENESS IS YOUR VERY FIRST KEY TO POSITIVE CHANGE.**

There are three basic areas that you need to develop an awareness of in order to systematically build mental toughness:

1. SELF-TALK or what I call your “INNER COACH.”
2. FOCUS OF CONCENTRATION
3. LEVEL OF PRE-GAME NERVOUSNESS or EXCITEMENT

### **DEVELOPING AN AWARENESS OF YOUR “INNER COACH.”**

*“Games are won and lost before the start and definitely before the final buzzer.” - Dr. G*

Do you know what this statement means? Your pre-game and during game thoughts or self-talk, that is, the dialogue of what I call your “inner coach” dramatically affects how relaxed you are, how well you are able to handle fatigue, your level of self-confidence and how well you play. The wrong kind of “inner coaching” will tighten you up, undercut your confidence, slow you down and trip you up. So let’s discover just what kind of “inner coach” you have working for you.

### **DISCOVERING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YOUR GOOD & BAD GAMES:**

#### **PART 1 – “THE INNER COACHING OF BAD PERFORMANCES.”**

Sit down, close your eyes and mentally review, in as much detail as possible a previous bad game. Remember where the game was held, the court you played on, who your competition was, the position you played, who you were guarding or who was guarding you, the crowd, the kind of day it was, etc. Specifically I would like you to “zoom in” on what you were thinking to yourself as you were warming up, right before the game started and as play began. What kind of “inner coaching” was going on? Next, recall what you were thinking about during the flow of the game. For example, what went through your mind as you went for a loose ball, when



you fouled an opponent, dropped a pass, heard the coach yelling at you, had your opponent beat you or strip the ball away from you or missed an easy shot or otherwise made a mistake? If a call went against you, how did you handle it? If an opponent was playing particularly physical or talking trash at you, what “inner coaching” went on? Take a moment right now to jot down in as much detail as possible the answers to the questions on Worksheet #1 “Self-talk & Bad games.” When you’ve finished, answer the very same questions for two more bad performances.

Now, compare your answers and see if you can discover a pattern between all of your bad outings. Usually you’ll find that right before and during your bad games you think very similar kinds of things. Your “inner coaching” is frequently negative, confidence eroding and non-stop. Oftentimes it fills you with dread and raises your anxiety level, making it all but impossible to play loose and relaxed.

**PURPOSE:** Examining several of your bad performances in this way will help you come to “know” your bad inner coach. Remember, before you can change negative “inner coaching” to positive, you must first become aware of your typical patterns of negativity. Once you get a handle on what you typically say to yourself both before and during your bad games, you will then be in a much better position to begin to turn this negative coaching around. However, if you have no awareness of the specific ways that you’re being negative, then you will continue to bring yourself down without any chance for change.

## **PART 2 – “THE INNER COACHING OF GOOD PERFORMANCES”**

Next, pick several of your best performances, games where you were extremely satisfied with how you played. Examining them one at a time, vividly review each great performance in relation to your “inner coaching.”

What were you thinking about before the game? What were you thinking about during warm-up? In the first half? What kind of thoughts or self-talk, if any, did you have during the game? When things got tough or stressful, what did you think? Write down all of your typical “inner coaching” for each of these good performances and record them on Worksheet #2 “Self-talk & Good Games.” Next,



compare all three or four of these good games to see if there is a pattern of “inner coaching” that accompanies your best performances. If you’re anything like most basketball players out there, then you should be able to discover a pattern here.

### **PART 3 – “COMPARE AND CONTRAST”**

Finally, take the self-talk worksheets #1 and #2, the differences between good and bad games and compare them. You should begin to see a significant difference in your “inner coaching” between when you play well and when you’re way off.

### **WHAT DOES THIS DIFFERENCE REALLY MEAN?**

Your awareness of the differences in self-talk between your best and worst performances forms a critical first step in being able to “retrain” your “inner coach.” For example, if you know the typical self-talk that always seems to accompany failure, as well as the self-talk that goes with success, then you are in a position to begin to turn the negative around before it leads to another bad game. Let’s say that after throwing up an air ball you hear things like, “That was just terrible! Boy do you suck. You don’t even deserve to be starting! Coach will probably bench your butt!” Letting this kind of negative self-talk run uninterrupted in your head will very quickly undermine your confidence, raise your stress level and completely destroy your overall game. This is why it is so critical that you immediately become aware of when your inner coaching turns negative like this so that you can take some steps to turn it around. Without this awareness, you are doomed to continue to sabotage yourself into playing poorly.

## S T E P 2

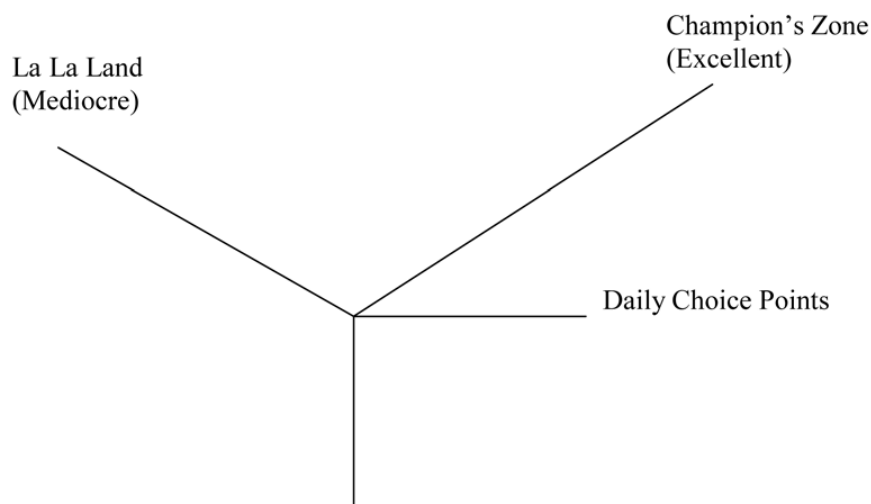
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### **MOTIVATION: TAKING YOUR GAME TO THE NEXT LEVEL**

So how badly do you want it? Do you **REALLY** want to take your game to the next level? Are you doing **EVERYTHING** possible in your training towards this end or are you inadvertently sabotaging yourself and holding yourself back? In other words, what is the **QUALITY** of your training like? What kind of an investment are you making in your basketball future on a daily basis? Are you “depositing” gold bullion whenever you train or are you chocking up a whole bunch of wooden nickels? Your future success on the court is almost completely in your hands and depends upon HOW you train.

Let's start with a very basic question: ***"DO YOU KNOW WHAT ROAD YOU'RE ON?"***

You see, every day when you train, you're on a road just like the one depicted in Figure #1. Everyday that road forks many, many times. And, as an athlete, you have a decision to make many, many times a day. "What road am I going to take?" All too often athletes make this decision over and over again and have absolutely no awareness of which road they are actually choosing. As a result, they end up making choices that might not be in their best interests, that might not help them get to their goals.



Let's look at Fig. #1 more closely. There are basically two different paths that you can follow in relation to your sport or life. When you take the left fork enough times, you'll end up in a place I call "La La Land." What La La Land will ultimately get you is "supreme mediocrity."

In other words, you will become unbelievably average. When you consistently take the right fork you will eventually find yourself at "The Champions' Zone." What do each of these paths actually look like?

Let's say that you're in the middle of practice, feeling really tired and the coach wants you to run suicides. As the drills begin, you notice that the coach isn't really watching you. You think to yourself, "I'm whipped! Time to chill," and then you deliberately slow down. When you do this,

you have just made a conscious decision to take the left fork. Or perhaps you know that your dominant hand isn't as strong as your non- dominant hand, and you know that you should be spending time practicing with it. However, it's no fun to practice things that you're not that good at, so you don't work on your off-hand at all. That decision is one that sends you down the left fork. Or maybe your friends want you to go party with them on a night before a big tournament and you know that you shouldn't go, that you need the sleep and you should go to bed early. However, you don't want to miss out on all of the fun so you go anyway. Guess what road you've just taken with that decision? You betcha! You've just gone down that left fork again.

Now it's obvious what the right road would be in each of these instances. When you're in the middle of doing wind-sprints and your body is screaming for mercy, you think, "this is my chance to lift the level of my game" and so you go even harder. When your coach or trainer suggests that you work on your non-dominant side you think, "I'm not very good at this and it's really frustrating, but you're only as strong as your weakest link," and so you put the time into strengthening that weakness. When your buddies want to stay out late and party you think, "Yeah, it would be really fun to do that, but my basketball dreams are much more important to me," and so you apologize to them and don't go, regardless of all the crap that they heap on you!

Which is the easier road to take? La La Land of course! It takes no character, discipline or special effort to take the left road, which is exactly why so many athletes do so. The right road is far more difficult. You have to sacrifice. You have to continuously push yourself outside of your comfort zone. It's more frustrating and involves setbacks and failures. The right road takes much longer and involves real suffering. So a question readily arises:

Why bother taking the right road? Why put yourself through all that aggravation and hardship? It's so much easier to go down the left fork and not have to work up a sweat.





How you answer this question is absolutely critical for you as an athlete. You can say that you'll take the right road because it's more rewarding. It'll make you feel much better about yourself. You'll accomplish far more in your life. You'll ultimately be successful. All these are all true. However, you'll take the right fork, the **RIGHT** road for one main reason. **YOU WANT TO!** You'll take the right road if YOU have an emotionally compelling reason to do so. There has to be something down that right fork that YOU really want, that's personally important to YOU. You can't take the right fork because it's just the right thing to do. You can't take it because you have a lot of talent and it will please your parents if you do so. You can't take it for the coaches. You have to do it because **YOU WANT IT!**

In other words you have to have what I call a **"BIG ENOUGH WHY,"** some personal goal, dream or mission that has captured your heart and imagination and provides you with ample enough reason to sacrifice, work hard, and do whatever it takes to become successful. Your **BIG ENOUGH WHY** can be trying to earn a college scholarship, make the varsity, break into the starting line-up or make it in the pros! With a **"BIG ENOUGH WHY,"** it will be easy for you to make the right choices when you get to that crossroad. In fact, it's when you're at the crossroad and being emotionally pulled down the left fork that you need that "Big Enough Why" the most. If you can consistently remind yourself of why you're training whenever the going gets really rough, then you'll get tough and keep on going in the right direction. It's the thought of your big goal or dream in practice that will help you stay motivated and on track. In fact, you want to be able to consistently ask yourself in practice, "How is what I'm doing today/right now going to help me get to my goal?"

### **HOW IS WHAT I'M DOING TODAY GOING TO HELP ME GET TO MY GOAL?**

This question will help you raise the quality and intensity of your training. It will give your practices both a meaning and a purpose. It will help you take responsibility for your training and cut down on those times where you just seem to be going through the motions. It will help you learn and improve faster. Ultimately, this question will



help you turn your basketball dreams into a reality. You don't want to be out-to-lunch when you practice. Keeping your **"BIG WHY"** in mind during practice will always insure that you're not a space cadet!

So just what road are **YOU** on whenever **YOU** practice? Are you motivated to head to the Champion's Zone or do your interests lie in exploring all of the nooks and crannies of La La Land? Answer the following questions to find out:

Use True (T) or False (F) answers.

1. I have a clear "Big Enough Why" in basketball
2. I think about my big goal at least once or twice a day during practice
3. I am frequently bored in practice and often don't see the point of what we do
4. I have a purpose/something I want to work on in each practice that I attend
5. I frequently have a tough time getting up for practice
6. I usually ease back a bit whenever I get tired in training
7. I regularly put in extra time outside of practice to work on my weaknesses
8. I don't have a specific BIG WHY other than I love this game and want to get as good as possible
9. My motto is "if it hurts in practice, it's just not worth doing."
10. I don't see the point in practicing hard if I'm never going to get playing time.
11. When the going gets rough, I go harder
12. I'd much prefer to hang out with my friends than train
13. I find myself thinking about my basketball goals outside of practice
14. I can always find something positive to get out of even the most boring of practices
15. I often question why I'm playing this game



### SCORING & INTERPRETATION:

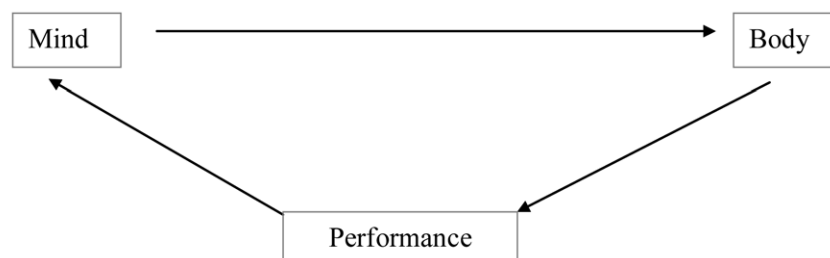
Key:	#1	T = 1 point
	#2	T = 1 point
	#3	F = 1 point
	#4	T = 1 point
	#5	F = 1 point
	#6	F = 1 point
	#7	T = 1 point
	#8	T = 1 point
	#9	F = 1 point
	#10	F = 1 point
	#11	T = 1 point
	#12	F = 1 point
	#13	T = 1 point
	#14	T = 1 point
	#15	F = 1 point

There are a total of 15 points that you can get as a high score. The higher your score, the more directed and motivated you are in your pursuit of the Champion's Zone. Scores between 12 and 15 indicate that you are making excellent use of training and are almost consistently taking the right fork. Scores between 8 and 11 indicate that your motivation is a bit off and you're not getting the most out of practice that you could. Scores between 4 and 7 indicate that you are seriously holding yourself back because of your focus in practice and attitude about basketball. Scores lower than 4 indicate that you are a "tour guide" for La La Land and suggest that you might want to take up another sport.

## S T E P 3

### UNDERSTANDING THE MIND - BODY - PERFORMANCE CONNECTION

Games are won and lost before the start and finish and shots are made or missed before they're even taken because of the interrelationship between your mind, body and performance. In other words, what you think or say to yourself right before and during your games, or right before or as you take a foul shot goes instantly and directly into your body and touches off some subtle physiological changes. These small physical changes, in turn, significantly affect how well you play. (see figure #2).



**MIND** – *What are the wrong things to think or say to yourself before or during a game?*

Take a moment now to carefully review your pre- and during game self-talk for all of your bad performances. These represent the **WRONG** things to be thinking about. For example, “I have to score 25 points!” “What if I screw up and miss this shot?” “I was so off in warm up.” “**I NEVER** play well against these guys,” “What if I get benched?” “I know my opponent is so much better than me!” “What if we lose to them again?” “I always seem to play badly when we play zone defense” are all thoughts that will set you up for failure. Why? Because these thoughts distract you from the task at hand and worse, make you **NERVOUS!**

**BODY** – *What happens in your body when you get nervous?*

**FIRST**, and big-time devastating, your muscles begin to tighten.

**SECOND**, your breathing speeds up and gets shallower.

**THIRD**, digestion shuts down leaving you feeling nauseous or queasy.

**FOURTH**, your hands and feet get cold as your blood flow is diverted away from the extremities.

**FIFTH**, your heart rate and blood pressure go up.

**PERFORMANCE** – *How is your play negatively affected by these physical changes?*

**TIGHT MUSCLES** – Slow your reaction time down; Disrupt your passing; throw you off rhythm; Kill your shooting rhythm and accuracy; Distract your focus from the flow of the game; Dramatically slow your foot speed down; Tire you out quicker; Make you more vulnerable to injuries; Insure that you will feel the pain and fatigue of oxygen debt much more intensely once you get tired towards the end of the game;



**ALL OF THESE ADDING UP TO YOU PLAYING TO ONLY A FRACTION OF YOUR POTENTIAL!!!!!!!** Playing with tight muscles is like trying to drive a car with the emergency brake engaged! You'll go **NOWHERE** fast!

**FASTER AND SHALLOWER BREATHING** – Tightens your muscles even more; Throws your rhythm further off; Interferes with your normal breathing cycle; Totally and absolutely kills your endurance and makes you feel like you're completely out of shape; Makes it more difficult to quickly recover after a fast break; Further distracts you from maintaining the right game focus; Makes it impossible to think clearly and accurately react to various game situations, **ALL OF THESE ADDING UP TO A SUPREMELY AWFUL GAME!!!!!!!**

**COLD HANDS AND FEET** – Make it that much more difficult to get a good feel of the ball. If your hands are a bit cold, then you will lose that all important feel for the ball. Simply put, your shooting touch will be way off. Similarly, if you're a rebounder and you have cold hands, you will have a much more difficult time effectively getting possession of the ball. **FEEL** is incredibly important in the game of basketball. Without it, you are in some serious hot water performance-wise!

**EXERCISE:** *Using your imagination to demonstrate the mind power of your "inner coach."*

Try the following exercise to get a "hands on" feel for the power that your "inner coach" can wield. Stand up with your feet shoulder width apart. Take both arms and raise them so that they are perpendicular to your body, shoulder height, palms facing each other and approximately shoulder width apart. Take your left palm and rotate the palm only so that it is facing up. Next, make sure that your right thumb is pointing straight up. Next, close your eyes and imagine, in as much detail as possible that in your left hand you have a very heavy book like a Webster's unabridged dictionary. Imagine that attached to your right thumb is a string. Attached to that string is a rather large balloon and that balloon is filled with helium, a gas that rises.



Repeat to yourself 3 times, very slowly “my left hand is getting heavier and heavier and falling.” Now repeat three times, “my right hand is getting lighter and lighter and rising.” As you do this try to really imagine the book and balloon in your hand and feel their effect. Then a second time, very slowly repeat three times, “my left hand is getting heavier and heavier and falling,” followed very slowly by, “my right hand is getting lighter and lighter and rising.” Finally, slowly repeat these same phrases three more times.

Purpose: What you think right before and during your games will have a tremendous impact on how you end up feeling and therefore how well you’ll perform. Did you notice that your left hand and arm felt much heavier or more tired than the right? If you did, you were able to create a real, physical state (heaviness or tension in that left hand and arm) just by using your imagination. So just what kind of “inner coaching” have you been providing yourself? Are you programming things into your head that get you to reach higher and achieve your goals like that right hand and arm? Or, like the left side, is your “inner coaching” weighing you down and spoiling your game?



## S T E P 4

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### CHANGING NEGATIVE INNER COACHING TO POSITIVE

If you don't already know it just yet, **NOTHING GOOD EVER COMES FROM BEING NEGATIVE! NOTHING!** When you consistently put yourself down after a missed shot, bad pass or stupid mistake, then the only "good" you'll do for yourself is to kill your self-confidence. I don't have to tell you that there's nothing positive in being negative in that way!!!! Imagine your team is 5 points down with only 30 seconds remaining on the clock. Tell me. How will being negative and down on your situation help you to come back before time runs out? That's a Duhhhh! You know it won't! Being negative in this situation will only serve to end the game 30 seconds early! You can only erase a deficit and come back by maintaining a positive, "never say die" attitude. Simply put, you have to learn to systematically retrain your "inner coach" so that he/she becomes more positive and supportive. Here's how:



**#1 KEEPING A NEGATIVITY LOG** – Spend at least one week as an “investigative reporter”. Who are you going to investigate? YOU and your negative “inner coach.” Each night jot down all the negative things that you said to yourself that day both at school and at practice. As you got ready for practice, what negatives did you feed yourself? As you went through practice, what negatives were bopping around “upstairs?” In the middle of that shooting drill what uninspiring things were you thinking every time you missed a shot? When you kept throwing the ball away while trying to run a new play, what comments did your inner coach make? If the coach got angry with you for these or anything else, what was the response from that inner critic? Without editing or attempting to “be positive,” try to allow these typical negative thoughts to flow. However, be sure to sit down that very night and record each and every one of these negative thoughts. You may be surprised to find that just by deliberately paying attention to how negative you are for an entire week, you’ll actually begin to cut down on some of this negativity.

**#2 USING A “VICTORY LOG” TO BREAK THE NEGATIVITY HABIT** – After spending some time getting to really “know” your “negative inner coach,” let’s start to train a more positive one. Negativity is nothing more than a bad habit. For most of us, it’s much easier and more familiar to be negative than it is to be positive. Right NOW it’s time to stop giving in to this self-destructive temptation! Starting today, I want you to keep a journal of all your small “victories.” Whatever you did that day that was even a little positive should get recorded. For example, if you normally hold yourself back during wind sprints and instead, you went all out, then record that. If you have a tendency to avoid working on your weaknesses and today you did some work on your off hand, then record that too. If the coach said something positive to you about your effort, attitude, or focus, then that should get in there as well. If you were working on your jump shot under pressure and you made even a few, then record that also. As you look for these small victories it is critical that you IGNORE that negative part of you that may be saying, “Ohhh, isn’t that cute, you went harder instead of giving in the way you always do!” **DON’T CENSOR THE POSITIVE! NO VICTORY IS TOO SMALL.**

### **WHEN WILL YOU NEED YOUR “VICTORY LOG?”**

You should spend time each day recording at least 10-15 little victories. If you come up with more, GREAT! Your victory log will provide you with a helpful perspective when things aren't going well. Whenever athletes go through rough spots in their training or careers, they tend to forget that they ever accomplished anything positive. It's during these tougher times that your victory log will provide you with a much needed, more positive perspective.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Use your victory log daily for at least 30 days. Turning a bad habit around and developing a new one usually takes about a month. However, my suggestion is that you get in the habit of using your victory log as a regular part of your training all season long. It will only take you a few minutes every evening to make your entries and this small investment of time will pay off huge dividends later.

### **#3 ELIMINATE THE “C” WORD TO BUILD CONFIDENCE**

The biggest confidence drain to your competitive performance is **COMPARISON**. When you compare yourself to teammates or opponents right before that big game or tryout you will be setting yourself up for failure big time! When you play the “comparison game” you'll **ALWAYS** lose! First of all, what others are doing is **TOTALLY** irrelevant to what **YOU** are doing. Second, comparisons ignore or discount your strengths, accomplishments and unique gifts. Third, the athlete who compares herself to a teammate or opponent is most often using the worst part of her imagination to evaluate herself. Why? Because our internal view of a teammate or opponent is usually skewed so that he/she always looks much faster, stronger or more skilled than we do. Think about **YOU** and **YOUR** training. Think about **YOUR** strengths and **YOUR** game. Forget about what your teammates or opponents are doing. In the end, they are basically irrelevant to you, your goals and how well you'll play. To help you blow the whistle on comparisons and end this confidence killing habit, spend a week or two logging your comparison thoughts on paper. Like with the “negativity journal,” keep a record of all your comparison thoughts at games, tryouts, practices and during the day in school. You may be completely surprised to finally become aware of just how much comparing you're actually doing. Remember, **AWARENESS** is the

first step to change. To be able to put an end to the comparison habit you want to become exquisitely aware of exactly how and how often you're doing it.

#### #4 "MAKE LEMONADE"

"When life gives you lemons, make lemonade out of them!" This old adage instructs you to take the bad things that happen to you during your basketball career and "reframe" them in a more positive way. When you get in the habit of looking for the solution in the problem, sooner or later you'll discover that you'll get much further as an athlete and as an individual. Dwelling on problems will always keep you stuck in them. Reframing these same problems by looking for solutions will get you back on track and in the fast lane again. Examples of reframes: Your teammate and best friend is getting more playing time than you and it's starting to make you upset. **REFRAME** = My friend is challenging me to work harder and rededicate myself to the game. This is an opportunity to take my game to the next level; The crowd is rowdy, noisy and nasty and they've singled you out to pick on. **REFRAME** = This is a wonderful opportunity for me to work on my concentration abilities and to practice staying focused on what's important and letting go of everything else; You have to guard a really great player and you're feeling totally intimidated. **REFRAME** = This is yet another opportunity to both challenge myself and lift the level of my game because better opponents will teach me far more than weaker ones; You had a mediocre or disappointing game and you're starting to get down on yourself. **REFRAME** = You learn more from failures than you do from successes. I can learn what I did wrong in this game and use it to play better next time.

**EXERCISE:** *Take the following problems and reframe them, and then begin practicing this mental skill on a daily basis:*

You have never played well against this team before. **REFRAME**  
= Large crowd with college coaches watching. **REFRAME** =  
You have to guard a dirty, physically aggressive player.  
**REFRAME** = You have a chance to take a game winning  
shot and you're afraid of screwing up. **REFRAME** = You  
didn't get enough time to properly warm up. **REFRAME**

= A teammate who has always played behind you is now starting to get more playing time. **REFRAME** = In training, the coach seems to be harder on you than everyone else. **REFRAME** =

## #5 TURN NEGATIVES INTO POSITIVES

Negativity is a nasty habit that will undercut your confidence and sabotage your game. It is always in your best interests as an athlete to begin to develop the much better habit of being positive. Understand that **NOTHING GOOD COMES FROM BEING NEGATIVE!** When you hear your negative self speaking up in practice or right before the opening tip in that big game, don't take him/her seriously enough to listen. Instead, get in the habit of substituting 4- 5 positive things in its' place. Imagine how you would end up feeling if every time you had a negative thought, it was instantly followed by 4- 5 positive ones. For example, "He's so much quicker than me and I'll never be able to keep up with him" can be followed by: "He may have more quickness, but I've been training really well the last several months. I'm in great shape and can run all day. Plus I have a better head for strategy. I'm aggressive and not afraid of leaving it all on the court."

Remember, when you first try to turn negatives into positives, you can count on part of you **NOT** believing a word of the positive messages. Understand that it is **NOT** important whether you actually believe these positives in the beginning. It is only important that you get in the habit of immediately replacing any and all negatives with 4-5 positive thoughts. It also doesn't matter if some of your positive thoughts are on the humorous side. For example: "I've never outplayed her before" can be followed by: "I absolutely love this game. My mental training has been going really well and besides, I look great in these shorts."

**EXERCISE:** *At home, take 4 of your typical pre-game negative thoughts and for each negative statement, come up with 4-5 positive thoughts. Remember, you don't necessarily have to believe these positive statements in the beginning. If you keep using this strategy of turning a negative thought into*

*multiple positive ones, within a few short weeks you'll find yourself in the habit of turning towards being positive.*

## **#6 USING AFFIRMATIONS**

Another powerful tool for systematically turning around a negative attitude and building confidence is by getting in the habit of using **AFFIRMATIONS**. An affirmation is a **POSITIVE STATEMENT THAT YOU MAKE ABOUT YOURSELF AS IF IT IS TRUE RIGHT NOW**. For example, if you consistently get fatigued and lose your skills in the fourth quarter, your affirmation might be, “as the game gets longer, I get stronger.” If you tend to get much too nervous before your games, your affirmation might be, “I’m cool and calm in the clutch. The bigger the game, the better I play.” If you tend to be negative under pressure then your affirmation could be, “I stay positive **NO MATTER WHAT!**” If you absolutely hate using your non-dominant hand, your affirmation can be, “I love my left hand!” or “Left is best!” or “Left is **RIGHT!**”

When used correctly, affirmations form powerful bridges between how you feel **NOW** and how you would like to be in the **FUTURE**. Your affirmations should be written on index cards and posted all around your room so that you see them continuously throughout the day. Carry some in your schoolbooks. Put some in your locker. Have some in your training bag. Like positive statements, it is not necessary that you believe your affirmations in the beginning. It is only important that you make a point out of looking at these positive statements over and over again throughout the day.

## **#7 AFFIRMATIONS AND THE PRESLEEP TECHNIQUE**

One effective way to get your affirmations into your unconscious and muscle memory is to use the “pre-sleep technique.” Take one particular affirmation that you’re working on at the moment, i.e. “I stay cool and calm in the clutch” and repeat it to yourself slowly as you lie in bed at night with the lights off. After the first repetition, try to imagine, in as much detail as possible, experiencing yourself doing

just that, being in a big pressure situation and maintaining your composure and playing well. Slowly repeat your affirmation a second time, once again imagining yourself staying focused and composed under pressure. Continue this sequence of slowly repeating your affirmation with the accompanying imagery a total of 15 - 20 times before you fall asleep. If you find that you only get through 10 repetitions before sleep overtakes you, don't worry. Continue this technique every night before bed.

## **#8 MASTERING LAST MINUTE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS AND SELF-DOUBTS**

Far too many basketball players get knocked off balance before and/or during their games by last minute negative thoughts and self-doubts. They get “emotionally hijacked” so-to-speak by these negatives, letting their fears and worries run away with their confidence, focus and, as a consequence, good play. It is absolutely critical for you to understand that you can still have the game of your life, even if you are flooded with last minute doubts or negativity. How is this possible?

First, you must understand that **LAST MINUTE DOUBTS AND NEGATIVITY ARE ABSOLUTELY NORMAL**. Even the very best players in the world sometimes entertain these thoughts right before their big games. However, they have figured out that **YOU CAN STILL PLAY WELL WITH LAST MINUTE DOUBTS AND NEGATIVES BOPPING AROUND IN YOUR CRANIUM**. The trick is not to allow yourself to get caught up with them. How do you do this? You must train yourself to use the negative thinking and self-doubts as neutral signals to simply **RELAX AND REFOCUS ON THE TASK AT HAND**. For example, if you're ready for the tip off and start to hear yourself thinking, “what if I have another bad game again?” you want to quickly and calmly shift your focus back to what you might normally be doing right before your game, i.e. warming up, stretching, etc.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** At crunch time you do **NOT** want to engage or fight with the negative thoughts and doubts. At game time you don't even want to try to be positive and use the above techniques I've mentioned! That's right! When you're waiting for the opening tip, or you're



in the middle of the second half you don't ever want to try to turn the negative thoughts around into positives! Why? If you start thinking, "I'm being negative, I've got to be positive" then your focus of concentration is up in your head with your **THINKING**. As a result you'll immediately distract yourself from the flow of the game in the moment. You can't play good basketball by thinking yourself through a shot or the game. You have to let the game come to you automatically, **WITHOUT THINKING!** Playing like a champion is all about trusting your instincts and staying focused in the **NOW**. Therefore any time your mind is throwing out negatives, you want to simply notice the thinking and immediately shift your focus to what is happening on the court in the game at that moment!

Here's a metaphor for dealing with any assault by negative thinking and self-doubts. When these last minute negatives begin to "attack" you, you want to respond as if you were an Aikido master. Aikido is a "soft" martial art where the practitioner meets an assault by utilizing the attacker's own force and momentum to effortlessly neutralize him. The fighter skilled in Aikido may, for example, quickly slip to one side, grab his attacker's wrist and twist it in just such a way as to completely and immediately render his assailant powerless. Rather than letting yourself get caught up in fighting with your own negativity, you want to effortlessly side step those thoughts by **REFOCUSING ON THE TASK AT HAND**. If the negatives persist, then again, refocus without emotionally engaging them.

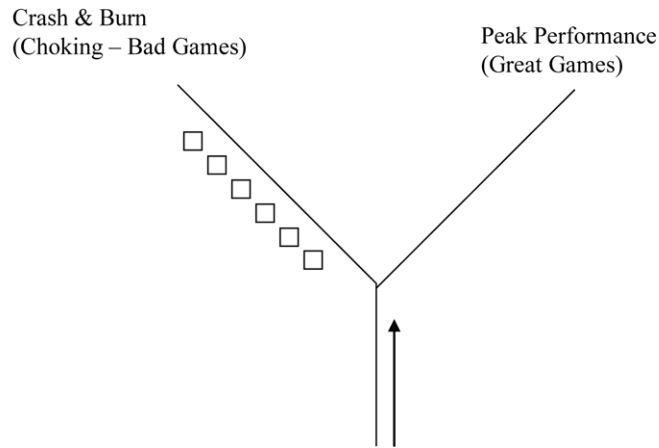
**KEEP IN MIND** that when you fight negative thinking and consciously try to "stay positive," keeping the doubts away from you, you simply make all these negatives stronger. Accept them. They're normal! Understand though that these inner negatives are **NOT** the voice of a higher power speaking to you. They **DON'T** predict the future. They are just brain wave activity!!! Nothing more, nothing less! Notice them and quickly refocus your attention to what you're doing right now.

**#9 USE HUMOR** – Another strategy you might try is to greet your typical negative thoughts and doubts with humor. For example, right before that all important tryout you hear, "you're going to blow it, I can just feel it! You're going to have a lousy tryout." Instead of engaging those

thoughts by thinking, “NO I’m NOT!” or “Stop thinking that! That’s being negative. I have to be positive!” you might quickly think “Gee, that was really helpful! Thanks so much for sharing” or “A thought for you my little friend. I’m just about to play in this scrimmage. Perhaps you may want to get yourself a soft drink and a snack, and I’ll chat with you when I’m done!” When you use humor on yourself in response to these last minute negatives, you neutralize the emotional reaction so common to them and therefore you end up staying calm and relaxed, both of which are absolutely critical to your playing your best when it counts the most.



#### #4 - KNOW THE "SIGNS" - THE ROAD TO CRASH & BURN



Imagine that you are driving down “X,” a road mapped out in figure #4. You are in a hurry and don’t know the area. Suddenly several hundred yards ahead you see a fork in the road. You desperately look for a place to stop for directions because you have absolutely no clue which fork you should take. Unfortunately, there are no signs of intelligent life anywhere so you pull over to the side of the road, stop the car and get out. You start walking towards the fork and that’s when you see it. At first you’re a little embarrassed that you missed it, because there, right by the left fork is a sign that says, “Dead End.” You chuckle to yourself as you get back in the car, turn on the ignition, put it in drive and step on the gas. When you get to the intersection you turn the wheel sharply to the left and go down the wrong road. A little further down the road there’s another sign that says, “Road ends, 2 miles.”

You smile to yourself and step on the gas. Soon you come to another sign that says, “Warning, road ends 1 mile.” You continue to accelerate the car.

Shortly after you approach another sign that reads, “Road ends, ½ mile NO Outlet.” You continue to accelerate. Then you pass a sign that says, “Danger. Road ends 1300 feet, 5000 foot drop.”

You think to yourself, “cool, I’ve never been over a 5000 foot cliff before in a car” and you continue to accelerate.

Both you and I know that no one in his right mind

would go down this road the way I've just described. However, there are two good reasons why someone who was actually sane would do this: **#1 THEY DIDN'T SEE THE SIGNS!**  
**#2 THEY SAW THE SIGNS AND CHOSE TO IGNORE THEM.**

What's this example have to do with you and playing well at crunch time? PLENTY! There are numerous personal "signs" as you approach a game which let you know that you're going down the wrong road. If you miss them or chose to ignore them, then you will consistently end up playing poorly. What are these signs? They represent the typical, unhelpful things that you tend to say to yourself or think as the game or tryout approaches, or as the game/tryout progresses. The more you entertain these thoughts, the further down that road you get and the more difficult it will be for you to turn yourself around and go down the right road.

For example, let's say the very first sign that I'm heading down the wrong road is when I start thinking about the competition: "We've never beaten them before." This thought may then be followed by, "What if I my shot doesn't drop like in the last game." My next thought might be, "I'm feeling really slow today" followed by "I'm feeling tight and tired." As I let each of these thoughts lead, uninterrupted into the next one my confidence continues to drop and my level of nervousness rises. Or let's say that during the game that I let my man beat me down the court or I screw up a fast break and easy scoring opportunity. My very first response to that, my first sign might be, "You totally suck! You should'a been able to stop him." If I let that one go uninterrupted it may be followed by, "You're so slow." The next thought/sign might be, "If you don't make something happen fast, you're going to get benched just like you did last game." The further I let myself get "down the road" into these thoughts, the more trouble I'm going to get into performance-wise. As a basketball player you must train yourself to recognize the very first sign that you're heading down the wrong road so that you can quickly "turn the car around" and head down the right road. Spend some time with the following exercise:

**EXERCISE:** Reading your “signs” to ‘crash & burn’ – Chose two or more past situations where you got too nervous to play to your potential. Think back to the very first sign (self-talk) that let you know you were heading down the wrong road. You may have been at home, the night before the game, in the car driving to the gym, or already there shooting around before the game. Now think back to the very next negative thought (second sign) that followed. Where did this thought lead? (third sign). Write down in sequence each of these thoughts leading right up to the opening tip and including your thoughts during the course of the game. Remember, if you can easily recognize the typical signs that indicate you’re going down the wrong road, then you are in a position to be able to turn things around. If you can’t recognize your habitually negative pre-game self-talk, then you will be doomed to “drive over the cliff” and play badly, even before the game starts.

**THE WISE PLAYER SAYETH:** “The problem is NOT the problem. The real problem is how you **REACT** to the problem.”

It is critically important for you to keep an understanding of this little saying in the back of your mind. Far too many basketball players get knocked off track by things that happen in the game: the ref makes a bad call, an unexpected injury to your star forward, a starter fouls out of the game and you have to finish without him, you miss the first three shots you take, the difficulty of playing against this particular opponent on their home court, etc.

Save your energy and keep your head on straight! With so many things in basketball as well as in life, the problem that has just happened and seems to be causing you so much heartache and aggravation is **NOT** the real problem. The **REAL** problem is always how you decide to react to this problem. It’s always your reaction that gets you into hot water far more than the event that occurred.

## S T E P # 5

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### **DEVELOPING AWARENESS OF YOUR FOCUS OF CONCENTRATION**

Concentration is the most central and important mental skill in mental toughness. If you always seem to get too nervous before your games or consistently shoot far better in practice than when you play, if you have a terrible time letting go of your mistakes or lousy calls, if you get easily intimidated or psyched out, then chances are quite good that your pre-game and during game concentration is way off. By learning to control your focus of concentration, you will better handle competitive pressure, avoid psych-outs and intimidation, quickly rebound from mistakes and bad breaks, keep your self-confidence at a high level and more consistently play your best when it counts the most. Understand that one of the main differences between your best and worst games is where you put your focus of concentration.

## DISCOVERING THE CONCENTRATION DIFFERENCES BETWEEN YOUR BEST & WORST PERFORMANCES

**EXERCISE:** *Recall in detail a great game. Where and when were you playing? What team were you playing for? Who were you playing against? How big was the crowd? How important was the game? Now try to remember your focus of concentration on the day of the game. Where was your focus during the shoot around? Where you focusing on yourself and what you were doing or was your concentration locked on the game to come or on how good your opponents looked? What did you concentrate on during the coach's pre-game talk? At the start of the game? What did you focus on during the first half? After a miss or blown pass? After hitting a three or making a great assist? If and when you got tired? With your opponent talking trash or playing overly physical? Record your answers on Worksheet #3, Concentration & Good Performances. Now answer the very same questions for at least two more great games. After reviewing your concentration for three or more of your better performances you will begin to get a good idea of where YOU need to focus in order for you to do your best.*

Next, pick a particularly bad performance from your past, a time when you felt that you really stunk the place out. In as much detail as possible, recall what you were focusing on the day of that game or tryout. Where was your focus during warm up? What did you concentrate on when the game started? If you got scored on by an opponent or threw the ball away, where did your concentration go? Where was your focus during halftime? If you were fouled and got to shoot free throws, where was your focus right before you took them? What did you focus on when things got tough in the game? Use Worksheet #4 Concentration & Bad Performances to record your answers. Take two or three more disappointing performances and answer the very same questions for each one. After reviewing

your concentration for each of these bad games you should begin to develop a pretty good idea of what you shouldn't be focusing on both before and during your games.

### **DO YOU PLAY BETTER IN PRACTICE THAN YOU DO IN GAMES?**

If you are like a lot of basketball players I've worked with over the years, then you'd answer with a resounding and frustrating YES to this question! "I play great in practice. I shoot the ball with uncanny accuracy when I'm by myself," you complain..."so how come my shot does a disappearing act when it counts, how come I seem to miss most of the shots I take in the game?" "Why can't I seem to buy a basket when it counts?" or "How come I lose my aggressiveness under pressure? How come I look to pass in the game instead of taking the shot when I have an open look?" You can easily come up with the solutions to these puzzling questions by doing a similar concentration exercise.

**EXERCISE:** *Take a moment to examine your concentration in practice as compared to pressured situations using Worksheet #5 Concentration in Practice vs. Games. What do you concentrate on when you're a playing pick-up game, shooting around by yourself or in team practice? When you are tired or hurting in practice, where do you put your focus of concentration? When you make mistakes in practice, what happens to your focus? How is that concentration different from your game focus? There is no mystery why a talented player will do better in practice than she will under pressure. It is directly related to having a different focus of concentration in both of those situations. The first step in developing the concentration of a winner is to become aware of these differences. Examine your worksheets to see if you can begin to discover the concentration differences between situations when it doesn't count like practice and those when it does.*

## WHAT IS CONCENTRATION?

### FOCUS ON WHAT'S IMPORTANT & LET GO OF EVERYTHING ELSE

Remember that it's never a question of not concentrating! You are always concentrating both before and during your games. The more important question is, **"WHAT ARE YOU CONCENTRATING ON?"** If you focus on the wrong things either before or during your games, then you will always play poorly and way below your capabilities. At game time there are many, many things that can distract you from having a proper focus: Your opponents and how big and good they are; How you feel that day; Whether you're starting or not; Whether your shot was falling in practice; The size of the crowd and who's in it; What's going on in school and your personal life; The refs; Your teammates and how they're playing; Your coach's yelling and comments to you and the team both before and during the game; How big this game is; and the list goes on and on! It is your job to KNOW exactly what is important for you to focus on and what you should be letting go of. Here's an exercise to really help you develop a working understanding of this all important principle: **FOCUS ON WHAT'S IMPORTANT AND LET GO OF EVERYTHING ELSE.**

### CATCHING MARKERS

**EXERCISE:** *Take 10 different colored magic markers and try the following "concentration test." Your task is to throw all 10 markers up at the same time relatively high above your head and to then try to catch as many as possible. Keep in mind that you can only use your hands to catch the markers, and your hands must be away from your body in the process. Scoring of your "concentration ability" is as follows: If you catch 10 out of 10, that's 100% and you have done an awesome job of focusing and we'll call you MR./MS. CONCENTRATION. If you catch 5 out of 10, that's 50%, which is a BIG "F" in any school. If you catch less than 5, that means that*



*you're challenged concentration-wise. Now, throw all 10 up at the same time. If you do this correctly without cheating, then like most people I do this with, you probably only caught 0, 1 or 2 markers. If this is the case, does it really mean that you can't concentrate? ABSOLUTELY NOT! This is an impossible task because there are too many things to focus on all at once. The fact of the matter is:*

## **YOU CAN ONLY CONCENTRATE ON ONE THING WELL AT A TIME**

While you can certainly focus on a ton of things at once, when it comes down to peak performance, you can only concentrate on one thing well at a time. If this is true, then you better make darn sure that the one thing you are concentrating really well on is **WHAT'S IMPORTANT!**

Now, pick one special marker in your group of 10 to focus on. For example, let's say the red one. Take that marker, stick it in the middle of the other 9 and throw all 10 up once again at the same time. Remember, your job is to only catch that one red marker. What happens? If you have relatively decent hand-eye coordination, then you effortlessly catch that red marker. The point? It's very easy to focus on what's important when you know exactly what that is ahead of time.

## **WHAT'S IMPORTANT FOR YOU TO FOCUS ON BEFORE AND DURING YOUR GAMES? USING FOCAL POINTS**

As we've already discussed, where you put your concentration before and during your games determines whether you gobble with the turkeys or soar with the eagles. Where you put your focus of concentration is called a **FOCAL POINT**. Focal points can be **KINESTHETIC** or something that you **FEEL**. They can be **VISUAL** or something that you **LOOK** at. They can be **AUDITORY** or something that you **LISTEN** to. Focal points help you **CONTROL YOUR EYES AND EARS**.



That is, they provide you with a predetermined place for you to put your concentration that will help distract you from anything negative or distracting. **CONTROLLING YOUR EYES** means that you only focus on those things, before and during the game that keep you calm, confident and ready to play your best. For example, if focusing on the size and skill of your opponents during warm-ups gets you nervous, you'd control your eyes by keeping them off your opponent and on visual and kinesthetic focal points, i.e. what YOU are doing during warm-ups, your shot, passing, warm-up drills, etc. **CONTROLLING YOUR EARS** similarly means that before and during the game you only want to listen to those things that keep you calm, confident and loose. For example, if people around you are talking about how big the game is and what's at stake, and this is getting you nervous, then you'd control your ears by listening to your favorite music, an auditory focal point to help distract yourself from this nervous generating conversation.

Examples of **KINESTHETIC** focal points are: The feeling of your stretch as you loosen up before the game; feeling your breath go in and out while you're stretching; The feel of the ball in your hands; The feel of your follow through while shooting, the feel of the ball as you dribble; etc. Keep in mind that for a lot of athletes, **KINESTHETIC** focal points are the most important ones to have during your performances. In basketball, however, while you may be somewhat aware of the feel of the ball and your movement, the flow of the game happens much too quickly for this awareness and focus to be conscious. As a result, if you do use kinesthetic focal points, they would be more beneficial for you before the game as a tool to help you stay calm and focused.

**EXERCISE:** *List 4 Kinesthetic (K) or feeling focal points that you can use pre-game.*

K- Focal points: Pre-game

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)

Examples of **VISUAL (V)** focal points are: Looking at the ball before your game; Looking at a teammate while you carry on a conversation pre-game; Defocusing your eyes and “spacing out” as you look at the court before the game starts; Keeping your eyes focused on the center of the man you’re guarding; Broadly focusing on the position of your teammates as you move without the ball. Etc.

**EXERCISE:** *List 4 Visual focal points that you can concentrate on before your games. List 4 Visual focal points you could use during your game.*

V – Focal Points: Pre-game

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)

V- Focal Points: During game

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)

Examples of **AUDITORY (A)** focal points are: Listening to music; Getting involved in a conversation with coach or teammates; Listening to the sound of your breathing; repeating a positive word or phrase to yourself over and over again; Listening to the sound of the crowd; Singing to yourself.

Exercise: List 4 Auditory focal points that you can use pre-game. List 4 Auditory focal points that you can use during your game.

A – Focal Points: Pre-game

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)

A – Focal Points: During game

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)



**IMPORTANT NOTE:** It is **NOT** necessary for you to have more than one or two focal points either before or during your games. It is also **NOT** necessary for you to have all three kinds of focal points. What is important here is that you develop familiar concentration targets where you can consistently put your focus both before and during your performances.

## **DEVELOPING CHAMPIONSHIP CONCENTRATION**

Do you know how to concentrate? This very simple skill is the heart of mental toughness and the secret to you consistently playing the kind of basketball that you're physically capable of. Want to learn to quickly bounce back from mistakes or bad breaks? Want to be at your best when the heat of competition is turned way up high? Then you have to learn to concentrate like a champion. To effectively build your concentration muscles you must begin to practice two mini-skills. First, you must recognize that your focus of concentration has veered away from what is important. Second, you must discipline yourself to quickly and gently bring your focus back to the proper target. Mastering this "recognize and return" skill will help turn you into a mentally tough player.

## **NUMBERS WITH DISTRACTIONS**

**EXERCISE:** *Sit quietly with your eyes closed, feet flat on the floor. Put your focus of concentration on your breathing. When you inhale, focus on the feeling in your lower belly of the air coming in. When you exhale and feel the air going out, focus on the number 1. You can "see" a number one in your mind's eye. You can repeat "one" in your head, or you can do a combination. Inhale, feel the breath. Exhale focus on the number. Since this is a boring exercise you'll find your mind beginning to wander. When you do drift: Quickly recognize that you've lost the proper focus. Return your concentration to your breathing and the*



*feeling of the air coming in. As you exhale focus on the number 2. You can see the #2 in your mind's eye, repeat the sound "two" in your head, or do a combination. Inhale focus on the breath, exhale focus on the number. Each time you lose your focus and drift, add a number. Do this exercise for 3 minutes without any distractions and then turn a radio or CD player on and try the same exercise for an additional minute or two.*

## **DEVELOPING A CONCENTRATION CUE**

**EXERCISE:** *Take a mini or regular sized-basketball and sit 3-4 feet away from it. Pick a specific spot on the ball to gently rest your eyes. Your eyes will stay on this spot the entire exercise. Shift your focus to your breathing and when you inhale, feel your lower belly rise. As you exhale and feel your diaphragm deflate, repeat a word to yourself. The word will become your "concentration cue" or concentration signal/reminder. You can use words like "ball," "focus," "power," "strong," "now," etc. Whenever your focus drifts from the ball, breathing or word, quickly and gently return your focus. Do this exercise for 3 minutes without any distractions. Then take your ball and put it on top of a TV set. Sit far enough back so that in order for you to still see your spot, you must also see the entire screen. Turn the TV on but on very low volume at first. Try to stay focused on your spot for the next minute without getting distracted by the images on the TV screen. When you do get distracted, quickly return your focus to your spot and concentration cue.*



**NOTE:** Sufficient practice of this exercise will develop and fine-tune your concentration abilities. Soon you will be able to quickly refocus yourself just by quietly repeating your concentration cue to yourself either pre-game or even during the game. Understand that this very simple exercise is absolutely critical in helping you strengthen your concentration muscles. If you're the kind of player who tends to hang onto missed shots or mistakes, who easily gets psyched out or intimidated or who has trouble staying calm under pressure, then I strongly recommend that you work with this exercise regularly.





## S T E P 6

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### PLAY YOUR OWN GAME/FOCUS ON YOU FOR GREAT GAMES

One of the more common concentration mistakes made by basketball players at every level is to get too caught up with the competition. When you focus too much on your opponent before or during your games, you undermine your confidence, make yourself nervous and stop focusing on the things that help you play your best when it counts the most. As a result, you'll always find your reaction time off and yourself a step or two behind. Thinking about how big, strong, fast or talented your opponent may be is probably the best way that I know of to **TOTALLY FREAK YOURSELF OUT!!!** In fact, allowing your focus of concentration to drift too much to your opponents either before or during your tryouts or games is the best strategy there is to intimidate or psych yourself out. Instead, you have to train yourself to





## **STAY INSIDE YOURSELF AND PLAY YOUR OWN GAME!**

What does this actually mean?

It means simply to focus on **YOU**, to not get caught up in comparing yourself with the person you're guarding, to not get distracted by comparing yourself with your teammates. **COMPARISON** is a dirty word in sports. When you get caught up in comparing yourself you will almost always come out on the short end of the stick. Why? Because comparison is something that we do in our head, using our imagination. Most of the time your imagination will give you a negatively distorted picture of your skills and ability in relation to others. If you really want to outplay a particular individual or team what this means is that you have to focus even more on yourself and your job, **NOT** on them! This is an important contradiction that most players and coaches don't fully understand. To outplay the competition you must focus on **YOU, NOT** on **THEM!** If you get too caught up with how good you think that they are or what you think they can do, then you'll tend to get yourself too uptight to play your best. As a result you'll go out there and either try too hard, forcing the game and trying to make things happen, or you'll be so intimidated by your opponent that you'll play cautious and tentatively.

This is probably why coaching legend and Hall of Famer John Wooden, former head coach for the UCLA Bruins men's basketball program and winner of 10 consecutive NCAA National Championships never scouted his opponents!! His attitude was that if his team played their own game and executed the way that they were trained, then it wouldn't matter much what the opponent did.

The wise point guard sayeth:

***REMEMBER, THE MORE YOU CONCENTRATE ON BEATING ANOTHER TEAM OR SCORING A LOT OF POINTS, THE LESS CHANCE THAT YOU WILL HAVE FOR EITHER! THE LESS YOU FOCUS ON BEATING AN OPPONENT AND SCORING, THE MORE YOU FOCUS ON YOU AND YOUR JOB, THE MORE CHANCE THAT YOU'LL HAVE TO SCORE AND COME OUT ON TOP!***

Understand this:

**EVERY MOMENT DURING A GAME WHERE YOU ARE FOCUSING ON THE OPPONENT AND HOW GOOD YOU THINK HE IS, IS A MOMENT THAT'S WASTED, A MOMENT WHERE YOU'RE HANDICAPPING YOURSELF, A MOMENT WHEN YOU WILL PLAY BELOW YOUR ABILITY!**

If you spend time worrying about an opponent, then you are robbing yourself of your speed, confidence and skills! How good your opponent is on paper, the kind of buildup your coach or others may have given him, his reputation, etc. are all totally irrelevant to whether you'll play the way you're capable of. You want your energy and focus on **YOU**, on your game and style of play, not on **THEM**! Yes, it's occasionally useful to have some scouting info on your opponent and his tendencies. However, getting too caught up in that information will most often psych you out. Stay inside yourself. Focus on **YOU! PLAY YOUR OWN GAME!!!!**

**EXERCISE:** Practice focusing on **YOU** in practice. During drills and practices be alert to whenever your focus of concentration drifts to a teammate, the coach or someone else watching. Immediately catch yourself and return your focus to what **YOU** are doing, to **YOUR** job right at the moment. If you find that you are focusing on a teammate and comparing yourself. Quickly interrupt this focus and bring yourself back to **YOU**. Try to get in the habit of immediately catching yourself the instant you drift away from **YOU** and then quickly bringing yourself back. The more that you work on this in practice, the easier it will be for you to stay inside yourself in pressured situations in games. Understand that when I say just focus on **YOU**, I am **NOT** telling you that you can't focus on your opponent when you're supposed to be guarding him. In those situations you are supposed to have some of your concentration on them physically.

## S T E P 7

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### STAY IN THE “NOW” FOR PEAK PERFORMANCE

Another common and costly concentration mistake made by many ball players at the big game or pressured tryout is what I call “**MENTAL TIME TRAVELING.**” What “time traveling” involves is mentally leaving the present, or the **NOW** and either going back into the **PAST** or jumping ahead into the **FUTURE**. For example, if you had a bad warm-up and couldn’t hit anything, and you’re still thinking about that as the game begins, then you are mentally in the past. If you turn the ball over or get burned by an opponent and you can’t seem to stop thinking about these, then you are again in the past. Similarly, if you go into a game thinking about the last time that your team lost to these guys, then you’re mentally in the past. As far as basketball players go, hanging out in the **PAST** is a universal mental mistake and one that will distract you from the task at hand and kill your confidence. To play your best you have to learn to immediately let your mistakes and missed shots go. Carrying your screw-ups around with you during a game will **NOT** help you correct them.

In fact, the time for you to work on your mistakes is **IN PRACTICE** after the game and **NEVER** during the game!

What can you do to quickly let your mistakes and bad shots go?

First of all, you have to get good at recognizing that your focus of concentration is in the **PAST**. One way to do this is to learn to recognize the language of the past. There are certain words and phrases that your “inner coach” uses that are clues to you being in the past. For example, Basketball players who tend to mentally hang out in the past, use language like: “Here we go again;” “I knew this was going to happen;” “I always fall apart under pressure;” or “Whenever I miss my first shot, I always have a bad game;” “We never beat them;” or “I should’ve done this” or “I shouldn’t have done that!” All of these phrases let you know that your focus is in the past.

Understand that having a past focus isn’t always bad. There are times that you can temporarily go back into the past and it can be both positive and constructive. For example, let’s say that you go into halftime down 30 – 19. You can think of other games in the past where you were down by that much and then managed to stage a come back. This kind of time traveling isn’t destructive as long as when you step back out onto that court for the second half, your focus is in the NOW.



## **LETTING GO OF MISTAKES:**

**MISTAKE CUES:** As we've been discussing, it is critical that you as a player learn to quickly let go of your mistakes or missed shots . Carrying them around with you for a minute or more will only tend to distract you and take you right out of the game. To help you quickly let go of your mistakes, I suggest that you develop your own personal mistake cue. A mistake cue is a word or phrase that you use the instant that you make a mistake to remind yourself to quickly let the missed shot or screw-up go. For example you can use a word like “erase,” “cancel,” **“NOW,”** or a phrase like “let it go,” or “head in the game.” The exact word or phrase that you use doesn't really matter. What does matter is that you choose one to remind yourself to leave the past in the past and to get yourself back in the **NOW**.

**MISTAKE WASTEBASKETS:** Another quick technique that you can use to help you let go of your mistakes is to pick one or two “mistake wastebaskets” on either or both sides of the gym. What's a “mistake wastebasket”? Interesting enough, it's where you can put all your mistakes and missed shots during the game so that they don't distract you. Actually, what you do is pick at least two spots or objects around the gym before the game starts that will serve as your wastebaskets. They should be something that is relatively easy to see from the court. You can choose a specific spot on the bleachers, a banner hanging from one of the walls, the top of the glass backboard at either end of the court, an actual trash can, etc. Once you've picked out your spot, you then want to make a “deal” with yourself. The deal is that every time that you miss a shot or mess up, you will “deposit” that mistake in the “wastebasket” until after the game. How do you “deposit” the mistake during the game? You can simply take a quick look at the spot and in that look you symbolically leave your mistake there. Or instead you can even quickly think of that mistake wastebasket and that accomplishes you depositing the mistake.





**MISTAKE FOLDERS:** A variation of this technique and one used to help emphasize that point that mistakes are to be thought about and worked on after the game and not during it is to imagine that on your bench you have left your very own “mistake folder.” Every time that you miss a shot or throw the ball away you can quickly glance over at your “folder.” That glancing symbolically represents depositing your mistake in the folder to be worked on later on, after the game.

**THE FIST SQUEEZE TECHNIQUE:** Your mental task after you make a mistake is to immediately let it go. Letting go actually has a physical feeling. Let me demonstrate it to you. Close your eyes right now and gradually tighten your right fist and arm from your fingers all the way to your shoulder. As you gradually tighten your hand and arm from 25% of your strength all the way up to 90% of your strength study the feelings of tension up and down your arm. Hold the tension about 10 seconds and then say the words to yourself, “let go,” and as you do, very slowly begin to let the tension drain out of your right fist and arm. Notice the difference in feeling up and down your arm as the tension slowly drains out. Now repeat this process a second time remembering to keep your eyes closed. Pay particularly close attention to the feelings of letting go as your arm relaxes. Repeat this exercise several times until you can memorize the physical feeling of “letting go.” Practice this exercise a few minutes a day so that you can link the words, “let go” with the actual physical feeling of letting go. In game situations, when there’s a bit of a break in the action, for example, during a time out, you can imagine that you’ve just put the miss or blown pass in your hand, make a fist, hold the mistake there and then, repeat those words to yourself, “let go.”

You can use this same technique after a particularly bad practice or game. Imagine that you can symbolically place that bad practice/bad shooting night in your right fist. Tighten it to 90% of your tension, hold it for 10 seconds and then repeat, “let go” to yourself. As you do, and you begin to feel the feelings of letting go, imagine that you can also let go of that bad performance and all the feelings associated to it.



**THE BREATHING TECHNIQUE:** In between halves or even during a time out, completely shift your focus of concentration out of your head and to your breathing and just follow your breath in and then out. As you exhale, and let go of the breath, imagine that you can also begin to let go of, a little at a time, any disappointment, frustration or anger about the first half, the way you played and anything upsetting that might have happened. With each progressive exhalation imagine that you can get rid of the tension, self-doubts and negative feelings until they become completely replaced by composure, relaxation and confidence.

**LETTING GO OF MISTAKES:**

Mistake rituals: (to be used on the bench, during timeouts or at half-time) As a player, it is absolutely critical that you keep your focus of concentration in the NOW of the action. To help you quickly let go of your missed shots and other miscues and bring your focus back into the action of the game, you want to develop a concise “mistake ritual.” What’s a mistake ritual? It’s a series of small steps that you go through mentally and physically after a mistake (when you have time from the action) that helps you return your focus to the NOW of the game.

Typically after a mistake, a basketball player tends to do three things that keep the missed shot or blown pass in the forefront of her mind. First, she’ll tend to allow her focus to remain on the mistake. Second, she will engage in negative self-talk, angrily putting herself down in her head for screwing up. Third, and as a result of the first two, her anxiety level and tension will rise. If you don’t immediately interrupt this process, if you allow yourself to stay distracted, upset and physically tight, then the one thing that you can surely count on is that more bad shots and mistakes will soon follow. You can effectively counteract these negative effects from a mistake by developing and practicing a mistake ritual.

Here’s an example:





I've just thrown up an air-ball, my third miss in a row and at the next time out I'm really down on myself. I keep thinking about what a crappy shot I just took and how embarrassing it was to hit absolutely nothing! ("You should've nailed that!" "You rushed it!" "You suck!" etc.) However, before I let myself get totally out of control, I shift my attention to one of my hands and I imagine that I can put the mistake there and squeeze my hand around the mistake, "holding it" tightly. As I do so, I shift my eyes to look directly at the coach while he/she's talking. I focus my concentration on the coach instead of the mistake. As I'm doing that, I next shift my focus to changing my negative self-talk. "Let it go. It's in the past. You'll get it back. Stay calm. You've got a good shot. Just stay loose and let the game come to you. Etc." Next, after I've countered my negativity, I deliberately shift my concentration to slowing and deepening my breathing. I do this to physically calm myself down. When you're uptight and your emotions are cranked into the "red zone," getting back in control of your breathing is one of the fastest and best ways to get your head back in the game. Now my ritual sounds like it takes several minutes to pull off. In actuality, it's only a few seconds and it takes place when the action in the game has stopped. When I feel sufficiently calmer, I take that missed shot or mistake that I was upset about that I've been squeezing in my fist and then I "let it go," I gently allow my hand to open up and, as I do so, I imagine letting go of the mistake.

You can take any piece from this ritual that you'd like. You can add new ones of your own. The point is that you want to develop your own personal ritual that you can use to help you mentally let go of the past and stay in the NOW. Take some time during the week and actually practice this ritual. That way when you're under the stress of a game and having made a mistake, you are still able to regain your focus and composure.

If basketball players aren't getting themselves trapped in the past, the other mental mistake they frequently make is to "time travel" into the **FUTURE**. When you leave the **NOW** and go into the **FUTURE**, you make yourself extremely vulnerable to nervousness and **CHOKING!** What does it mean to go into the future? You're thinking about the game's outcome as you're warming up. You're telling



yourself that you should be able to score 20 points against these guys. You worry about whether you'll play well. You question whether you'll have a good enough tryout to make the starting lineup. You get into the "what-if's?" "What if we lose?" "What if I get re-injured?" "What if I get benched?" "What if I screw up again?"

Now don't get me wrong. There are times when it is perfectly fine to go into the future. When you do mental rehearsal and you "mentally practice" playing to your potential, staying calm and playing aggressively, you are in the future. This will not get you into trouble as long as your mental sessions are far enough ahead of your game so that they don't get you too nervous. Thinking about your goals in practice, why you're working so hard and what you want to accomplish is going into the future. However, it's perfectly fine to spend some time in practice reminding yourself of why you're working hard. The key point here is that you do **NOT EVER** want to take your goals with you onto the court for a game or an important tryout. Keep in mind that focusing in the future on your goals will motivate you in practice to work hard but having that same future focus going into a game will only serve to get you too uptight to play your best.

The wise power forward sayeth: **EVERY MOMENT THAT YOU SPEND PRE-GAME OR DURING THE GAME WHEN YOUR FOCUS IS EITHER IN THE PAST OR THE FUTURE IS A MOMENT WHERE YOU ARE PLAYING FAR BELOW YOUR POTENTIAL.** The secret to you playing consistently well with intensity and a high level of skill is very simple. You must mentally keep yourself in the **NOW!**

**THE MOST IMPORTANT SHOT IN ANY GAME IS THE ONE THAT YOU ARE TAKING RIGHT NOW!**

It is critical that you learn to immediately recognize when you are mentally time traveling so that you can very quickly return your focus to the task at hand. If you quickly return your focus to the **NOW** every time that you drift, then the drifting will not hurt your confidence nor hinder your play. What **WILL** sabotage your game is when you



drift to either the past or future and then you allow yourself to stay there for an extended amount of time.

## **DEVELOPING AWARENESS OF YOUR MENTAL TIME TRAVELING**

**EXERCISE:** *Spend time in practice working on staying mentally in the NOW. Pick a five minute period every so often during practice where your goal is to mentally keep your focus on what you are doing in the NOW. Every time that you become aware that your focus has drifted backwards to the past and a mistake or forward to the future and what might happen later, quickly return it to the now and what you are doing at that moment. This is an excellent way to build up this very important mental muscle that you need to play championship basketball.*

## **LEAVING YOUR BAD GAMES IN THE PAST – FORGIVENESS**

Want to play like a champion? Want to go as far as possible in this sport? If you do, then you have to learn to be kinder to yourself after you mess up. It's one thing to have high standards and expect yourself to perform to these. It's quite another to put yourself down and emotionally beat yourself up whenever you fail or fall short. Getting down on yourself will NEVER make you a better player. NEVER! What it will do is further erode your motivation and kill your confidence. Instead you want to learn to forgive yourself for your bad games, losses and failures. Use your setbacks to figure out what you need to change. Use your failures as feedback to improve. However, do not waste your emotional energy using your failures and losses as evidence that you aren't good enough. This is a huge mistake that will never motivate you to greatness. Instead it will progressively beat you down. Be a "good coach" to yourself. Forgive yourself for your humanness. Forgive and then forget your mistakes.



## **ARE YOU TRYING TO PLAY CHAMPIONSHIP BASKETBALL WITH WEIGHTS ON?**

One big mental mistake made by athletes at every level is to go into the game carrying expectations. Expectations are related to the game's outcome or your personal goals. If you want to achieve a certain outcome, score so many points, grab so many rebounds, prove to the coach that you deserve to be the starting point guard or impress the college coaches in the stands watching, then whether you know it or not, you're carrying "heavy" weights into that event if you're thinking about those goals as the game begins. It's fine for you to have goals and expectations in practice. In fact, your expectations and goals can actually motivate you to go harder and longer in practice. However, a cardinal rule for playing **WINNING BASKETBALL** is....

## **NEVER TAKE YOUR GOALS WITH YOU ONTO THE COURT WHEN IT COUNTS.**

Bringing expectations or goals onto the court with you at crunch time will only weigh you down just as sure as if you were wearing 10'lb weights strapped to each ankle and 5'lb's strapped to both wrists. You will feel too burdened to play to your potential. When you make a game, tryout or showcase too important, when you pressure yourself with "I have to," "I've got to," "I should," or "What if I don't?" then the end result is that you'll play tight and tentatively. Leave your goals and expectations at home where they belong. Your goals and expectations should only be used as a motivational tool for practice, **NOT** as a pressure inducing threat when it counts in games.

**TECHNIQUE:** Write your goals down on a piece of paper the week or night before a big game or tryout and then put those goals in a drawer, completely out of sight. Do not look at your goals until after the performance is over. This is exactly what you need to do mentally. You need to keep your goals and expectations out of sight when it comes to the big performance.



## WINNING FOUL SHOOTING – DEVELOPING A CONSISTENT PRE-SHOT RITUAL

The best free throw shooters in the world, at **EVERY** level that this game is played on all have one thing in common: They have a **CONSISTENT** pre-shot ritual that they use whenever they step to the line to shoot. They do the very same things no matter how big the game is or what the score is. While this ritual varies from player to player, it doesn't **EVER** vary for the player taking those free throws. It's always the same whether he's shooting a one and one in the first two minutes of a game or stepping to the foul line with his team down by one, no time left on the clock and his one free throw needed to send the game into overtime!

There are two crucial mental ingredients to championship free throw shooting: #1 – Staying focused in the **NOW** on what **YOU** are doing; #2 – Staying calm and loose. When used correctly, your pre-shot routine will help you successfully accomplish both.

The way it does this is by giving you something to do before you shoot that is comfortably **FAMILIAR**. You may be playing in front of the biggest crowd of your life, in the most important game of your life, taking the two biggest free throws of your life! However, the one thing that remains the same, the one thing that you can always count on to be comfortably familiar is your pre-shot ritual. That series of little, idiosyncratic things that you do to get yourself ready before you release the ball.

Whether you rub the bottom of your sneakers at the top of the key a' la' Larry Bird before you even step up to the line, bounce the ball 4 times, spin it counter-clockwise in your hands, line it up a certain way, hike your shorts up, cross yourself, take a slow deep breath, etc. doesn't matter. What matters is the fact that you are doing something that is **FAMILIAR**.

Why does this matter? Because it's the unknown or the situations that you've never been in before or are not used to that make you nervous and uptight. But the things that are familiar to you, that you **REALLY** know can calm you down. Another way that I talk about this is

to say **FAMILIARITY BINDS ANXIETY**. And while you may never be able to control all of the things that surround a particular free throw situation, i.e. how big the shots are, how much time is left on the clock, the size of the crowd, the consequences for missing or making these, etc., you can always control each and every one of those little steps that you take before you release the ball.

Your pre-shot ritual is like a **SAFE PORT IN A STORM**. While everything around you may be raging and unpredictable, that little ritual of yours is a spot of calm, protected “sea.” When you keep it the same, it can help calm you down and narrow your focus to the task at hand.

Unfortunately a lot of ball players don’t know how to use their pre-shot routine and so when they get to the line to shoot clutch free throws they let the pressure of the moment get to them. They think about all of the wrong things and, as a consequence, they start getting incredibly nervous and tight. As a result, they break a cardinal rule of good free throw shooting: **KEEP YOUR PRE-SHOT RITUAL THE SAME EACH AND EVERY TIME YOU STEP TO THE LINE TO SHOOT**. Their nerves cause them to change their ritual. They either change the speed or start adding or subtracting things. Instead of bouncing the ball 5 times, they bounce it once or 10 times. Understand this:

**WHEN YOU CHANGE YOUR RITUAL BEFORE YOU SHOOT IN A GAME, THE ODDS ARE HUGE THAT YOU WILL MISS THAT SHOT!!!!**

So what’s the correct way to use your pre-shot routine? The **RIGHT** way to get your ritual working for you is to understand the purpose of the ritual.

Not only does it help you stay calm, but equally as important, **IT HELPS YOU KEEP YOUR CONCENTRATION ON THE**

**RIGHT THINGS!!!** The trick to clutch free throw shooting is to focus on the each small step of your ritual as you’re doing it. That is, as you walk to the line and set your feet, you want your focus of concentration 100% on walking to the line and setting your feet! You don’t want your



attention wandering to the “what if’s?” as you walk to the line. Instead you want to have your eyes down **LOOKING AT WHAT YOU’RE DOING**, and then **FEEL** your feet move into the right position. Similarly as you bounce the ball five times, you want to **LISTEN** to the sound of the bounce, **WATCH** exactly where it hits the court and **FEEL** the ball on your fingertips. As you take a slow, deep breath, you want to feel that breath moving through you, rather than thinking, “Oh My God! What if I miss these?!!!!”

When you **CONSISTENTLY** focus your concentration on each step of the ritual, seeing, feeling and hearing what you’re doing, **WHILE** you’re doing it, then all of your attention placed here will calm you right down. Therefore when you go to shoot after the last step in your ritual, you’re calm, composed and focused. When you’re using your ritual correctly, you are using each step of the ritual as a “focal point” to distract you from all of the other distractions.

So the key to an effective pre-shot ritual besides consistency isn’t what you actually do, (i.e. whether you bounce the ball 4 or 5 times, repeat a magic word in your head, or hold the ball a certain way) as much as it is where your focus of concentration is as you do each one of these steps.



## S T E P 8

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### STAYING COOL & CALM IN THE CLUTCH

(LEARNING HOW TO HANDLE THE PRESSURE OF BIG GAMES)

#### #1 UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES OF CHOKING AND PRE-GAME NERVOUSNESS

Here's the good news about those pre-game jitters: The importance of the game or tryout doesn't make you nervous. How talented or big your opponents are doesn't make you nervous. The size of the crowd doesn't make you nervous. Who may be in the stands watching doesn't make you nervous. Your opponent's record or reputation doesn't make you nervous.



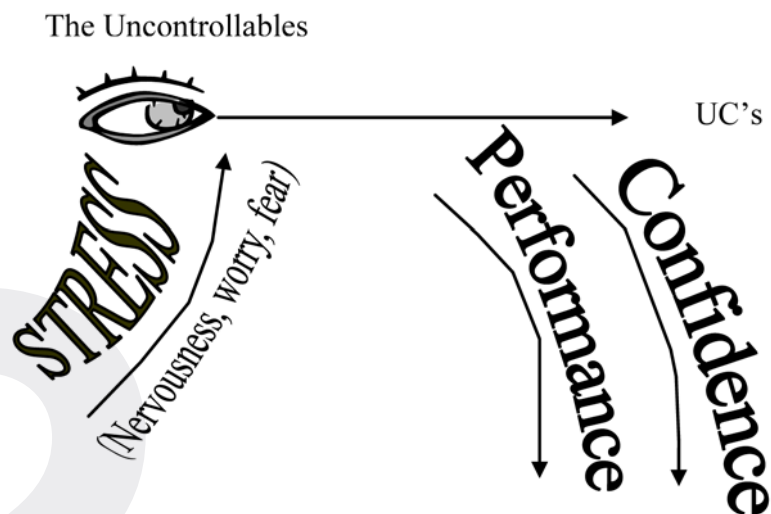
## YOU MAKE YOURSELF NERVOUS

It is **NOT** outside events that cause you to get so nervous that you can't seem to breathe and feel like you're going to leave your lunch on the court. Instead, it's what you say to yourself and focus on both before and during your games that's the real culprit here. Nervousness comes from inside, not outside of us. This is the good news because you can learn to control what you think about and focus on before and during your games. It's the good news because with a little bit of practice, you can learn how to calm yourself down under big game pressure.

## THE UC'S AS THE MAIN CAUSE OF RUNAWAY NERVES

### (FIGURE #5)

When you go into a game focusing on one or more UC's or "uncontrollables" three things will always happen to you. First, you will begin to get nervous and physically tense. Second, you will lose your confidence. Third, and as a direct result of these first two, your performance will quickly "head south," down the proverbial tubes. An uncontrollable is any factor before or during your game that is directly out of your control. Uncontrollables are mental traps. They are lying in wait for you and every other basketball player at that game/tournament. The bigger the competition, the more likelihood there'll be that you will fall into one of these mental traps. How do you avoid a trap? **YOU HAVE TO SEE IT! YOU HAVE TO KNOW IT'S THERE!** You have to know what the uncontrollables are and especially the ones that have gotten to you in the past.



## GETTING TO KNOW YOUR “UC’S”

**EXERCISE:** *Below is a list of some typical uncontrollables. Go through the list and put an asterisk next to each UC that has gotten to you in previous pressured situations. When you’re finished, take a piece of paper and list all the uc’s that you starred. Next, take this list and post it in a highly visible place in your room. Why would you want to do that? Isn’t that sort of negative? If the uncontrollables are traps and the only way to avoid a trap is to be able to “see” it ahead of time, then having such a list will keep you exquisitely aware of what you should stay away from concentration-wise:*

### THE UC’S

How big the game/tournament/tryout is

Your teammates’ performances and whether they’re getting you the ball

Your opponent – His size, strength, talent, reputation, aggressiveness, etc.

Whether your opponent plays head games or talks trash

The refs– making bad calls and/or unfair ones

The temperament of the crowd/spectators

Luck – either good or bad

Your coach and decisions he/she makes about the lineup and playing time

How you feel that day (both physically and emotionally, i.e. sickness, fatigue, injury, etc.)

The kind of warm-up you had, whether your shot was falling

Other people’s expectations of you (How they will think of or see you)

What your parents will think or say about how you play

Who’s watching the game (i.e. college or pro scouts in the stands)

Anything related to the **FUTURE**, (i.e. scoring, winning, etc.)

Anything in the **PAST** (missed shots, mistakes, your last game, etc.)

The unexpected (game delays, etc.)

Academic/personal stuff outside of basketball, i.e. pressure for papers/tests Injuries that occur during the game

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Keep in mind that focusing on an uncontrollable by itself won't get you into trouble. What **WILL** get you into performance hot water is focusing on an uncontrollable and **NOT** immediately returning your concentration to those things that you **CAN** control. It is perfectly natural to get periodically knocked off balance by the uc's. When this does happen, be sure that you:

**#1 RECOGNIZE THAT WHAT YOU ARE NOW FOCUSING ON IS AN UNCONTROLLABLE;**

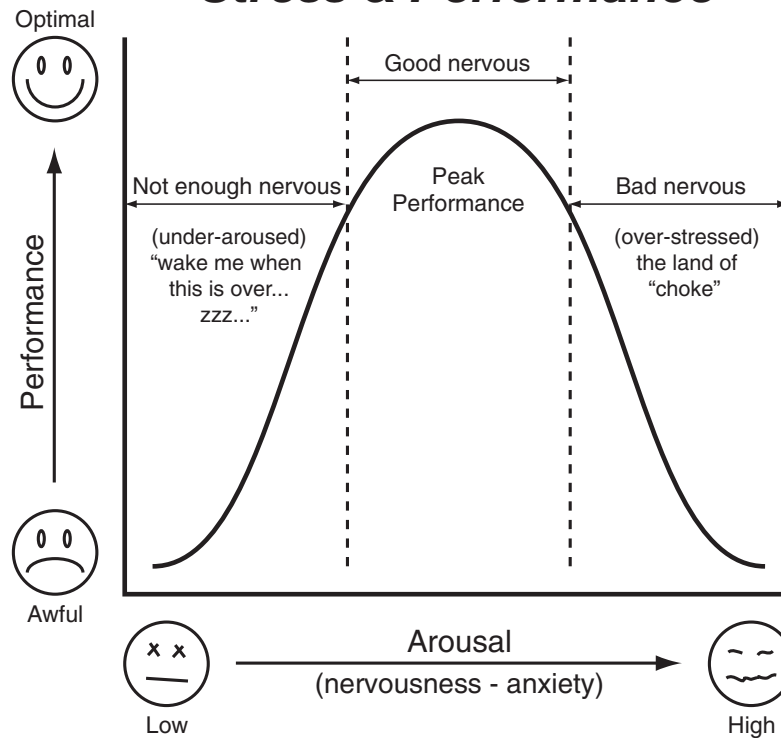
**#2 QUICKLY AND GENTLY RETURN YOUR FOCUS BACK TO WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL AND WHAT'S IMPORTANT AT THAT MOMENT.** Remember, the one thing that you can **ALWAYS** learn to control is how **YOU CHOOSE** to react to the uncontrollables.

**TO STAY CALM UNDER PRESSURE, BE SURE THAT YOU SHIFT YOUR FOCUS AWAY FROM THE "UNCONTROLLABLES."**

**#2 READING YOUR LEVEL OF PRE-GAME NERVOUSNESS/EXCITEMENT**

How excited or nervous you are before your games will make or break how well you play. Since the secret to playing great basketball under pressure lies in staying loose and relaxed, your ability to consistently do this is absolutely critical to making your basketball dreams come true. "Reading" your level of pre-game excitement/nervousness is an important first step in getting yourself back in control.

## Precompetitive *Stress & Performance*



In figure #6 you can see that as you move from left to right on the horizontal nervousness/ excitement scale your level of pre-performance physiological arousal (nervousness) increases from being completely relaxed or under-aroused on the far left to being completely freaked out or over-aroused on the far right. The vertical axis measures, how well your playing. When you're high on that axis you're playing well and when you're low you're playing poorly. As the diagram illustrates there are three basic levels of pre-game nervousness/excitement: "not enough nervous"; "good nervous"; or "bad nervous." Understand that it is **IMPOSSIBLE** to play to your potential when you are in "not enough" or "bad nervous." If you go into a game overconfident or too cocky, the resultant "not enough nervous" will insure that you play flat. If, on the other hand you go into the game dreading it, worried about losing, feeling too much pressure or in other ways over-aroused, the resultant tight muscles will insure that you choke badly.

Playing your best when it counts the most demands that you be in “good nervous” right before the start. “Good nervous” is actually not nervousness at all but a feeling of being excited, anticipating the game and feeling a sense of confidence that you’re up to the challenge while at the same time, still maintaining a relaxed looseness.

There are 3 primary ways that you “read” your level of pre-performance nervousness:

**#1 PHYSICALLY** in how you **FEEL** in your **BODY**

**#2 MENTALLY** in how you **THINK** and what you **FOCUS** on.

**#3 BEHAVIORALLY** in how you **ACT** pre-game.



“Good,” “bad” and “not enough nervous” look and feel different from each other. If you can learn to recognize these differences and your particular signs of “good”, “bad” and, when appropriate “not enough” nervous, then you are one step closer to learning to consistently stay cool and calm in the clutch. The following is a list of some of the general signs of increased nervousness (either “good” or “bad nervous”) in our three main categories:

<b>PHYSICALLY</b>	<b>MENTALLY</b>	<b>BEHAVIORALLY</b>
Increased heart & pulse	Thinking speeds up	Rituals
Faster/shallow breathing	Negative thinking	Mood swings
Tighter muscles	Focus narrows	Getting “hyper”
Cold hands/feet	Increased self-doubts	“motor mouth”
Dry mouth	Critical of self/others	quiet
Frequent yawning	Forgetting	no movement
Heaviness in limbs	Negative images	nervous habits
Energy/lightness	The “what if’s”	superstitions
Fatigue	Getting “spacey”	“the giggles”
Nausea	Positive/negative attitude	hostility
Vomiting	mental rehearsal	withdrawal
Frequent urinating	increased confidence	
“The runs”	hang onto mistakes	
increased sweating	let mistakes go	

## LEARNING TO “READ” YOUR OWN PERSONAL SIGNS

**EXERCISE:** *Think back to several really great past performances. These reflect a state of “good nervous.” Using Worksheet #7 and the above three columns as a guide, try to recall in as much detail as possible exactly how you felt physically, what you thought about/focused on, and how you acted before each of these top performances. Next compare all your responses and you should discover your typical signs of “good nervous.” Now do the same for several sub-par performances using Worksheet #6. (most bad performances are a direct result of too much excitement or “bad nervous” rather than a state of “not enough nervous.”) Again, use the three categories to help you get specific about what your “bad” or “not enough nervous” looked like. Once you’ve reviewed several bad performances in this way, see if you can discover any patterns in how you experienced “bad” or, when applicable, “not enough nervous.” These patterns will reflect your typical signs of “bad (or not enough) nervous.”*

### #3 ACTING AS IF

The **“ACT AS IF”** strategy is one of the more important mental toughness techniques to help you get yourself back in control when the pressure is turned way up high and the garbage is hitting the fan. **ACT AS IF** is based on the principle:

**IF YOU ACT THE WAY THAT YOU WANT TO FEEL, SOON YOU WILL BEGIN TO FEEL THE WAY THAT YOU ACT.**

The way that you feel on the inside, your **EMOTIONS**, are always determined by how you act on the outside, your **MOTIONS**. In other words the way that you physically carry yourself, your posture, facial expression, physical gestures, walk, how you carry your head and shoulders will ultimately affect and determine how you end up feeling emotionally. After a bad loss or right after the opponents make a run, many basketball players will hang their head, drop their shoulders, put a disgusted or down look upon their face and drag their



feet around. However, when you **ACT** discouraged and down, when you act like a “loser,” you will begin to **FEEL** even more bummed out. Instead you want to **ACT AS IF**. You want to keep your feelings/emotions **INSIDE** and on the **OUTSIDE** you want to act like everything is fine and in control.

Keep in mind that **ACTING AS IF** has absolutely nothing to do with moving your lips or trying to trick or convince yourself that everything is fine. Everything isn't fine and it's **OK** to acknowledge that fact on the **INSIDE**. However, on the **OUTSIDE** you want to act like you're in control by keeping your head and shoulders up, a smile or neutral expression on your face and maintaining a spring in your step and energy in your behaviors.





**ACTING AS IF** is what I call a **WINNER'S FALL BACK POSITION**. When a winner is exhausted, she will physically act like she has a ton of energy. When a winner is nervous, he'll physically act calm. When a winner is discouraged or down she will act as if she's up. Acting as if is the **FAKE IT 'TIL YOU MAKE IT STRATEGY** where you are deliberately **TELLING A LIE** with your body! So pre-game, when you can feel your lunch coming up and you can't seem to stop your knees from knocking together, **ACT AS IF** you are calm and in control. Deliberately act exactly the way that you would as if you were in "good nervous." If before all your great games you were jumping around, laughing and joking with your friends, then get off your butt and start doing that!

One of the main reasons that **ACTING AS IF** is such an important strategy is because basketball is a game of momentum ebbs and flows. You can be up one minute and down the next depending upon what plays get made and what shots are dropping. Whether these momentum shifts overwhelm you or not, whether they give your opponent the added edge to pull off the win depends entirely on how you and your teammates respond when things are going badly. If you hang your head after several missed baskets, if you show your upset and disgust when the other team goes on a 10 point run, then you are inadvertently giving your opponent a psychological and emotional boost by acting like a loser.

Anytime you show your negative emotions on the court either by dropping your shoulders, throwing your hands up in disgust, arguing with the refs or dropping your head, you are letting your opponent know that you are upset and therefore vulnerable. You are telling your opponent, "I'm in trouble and now's the time to finish me off." It's like being in a high stakes poker game but continually showing your cards to your opponents before you bet. When you do that you'll lose your shirt! When the other team scores 8 unanswered points, or things go against you, you want to show your opponent absolutely nothing. You want to keep a neutral or intense expression on your face and **ACT AS IF** nothing has happened. When your opponent sees that time after time over the course of the game that you have no negative reaction when things go against you, it will ultimately have an intimidating effect on him.

So keep your cards to yourself when you play. **ACT LIKE A WINNER** all the time on the court. Keep your head up, your shoulders square and keep your feet moving quickly whenever things go wrong. Do not let on that you may be feeling down or discouraged inside. On the outside always show your opponent the behavior of a champion.

## **STAYING CALM IN THE CLUTCH: RELAXATION TECHNIQUES**

### **SLOW AND DEEPEN YOUR BREATHING**

When you're nervous, your breathing speeds up and gets faster. This kind of shallow, rapid breathing will tighten your muscles and tire you out prematurely, causing you to slow down on the court and play poorly. To help you quickly calm yourself down under pressure you must learn to control the depth and rate of your breathing. Sit quietly in a room free from distractions and put your concentration on your diaphragm or lower belly. Inhale very, very slowly focusing on your lower belly filling up like a balloon. At the top of your breath, when you can't take in any more air, pause for a slow count of 3 or 4. Then exhale, much slower than normal and feel your lower belly deflate. Repeat this sequence and imagine that as you inhale, you are completely surrounded by a white cloud. The cloud is filled with fresh oxygen, energy, confidence, calmness, strength, endurance, etc. As you inhale very slowly and feel your diaphragm rise, watch that cloud go in through your nose. At the top of your breath when you can't take in any more, pause and as you count slowly to 3 or 4, imagine that you can experience all that good stuff that you inhaled moving throughout your body. As you exhale slowly and feel your belly fall, imagine that you can watch that cloud come out from the tip of your nose, as you get rid of any negative energy, fatigue, self-doubts, stress, jitteriness, etc. Notice that that as you exhale, the cloud now comes out a much darker color like black or brown. Repeat 8 – 10 of these slow, diaphragmatic breaths being sure to concentrate on the feeling of the air coming in and going out and “watching” in your mind's eye, the cloud coming in and going out.

**NOTE:** *Like all the exercises and techniques in this workbook, consistent practice of this breathing technique will enable you to confidently rely on it in pressured situations. Two or more of these diaphragmatic breaths right before the game or just before taking those clutch free throw will help you calm down and get yourself back into “good nervous.”*

## **#6 STRETCH**

Stretching is an easy and effective way to quickly calm yourself down pre-game. When done the correct way, stretching will loosen your muscles and provide you with a calming focal point where you can rest your concentration. The key to correct pre-game stretching is very simple. Make sure that as you physically stretch, your focus of concentration is completely on what you are doing in that moment and on the feeling of the stretching. It does you absolutely no good to stretch pre-game if, while you stretch you're allowing your concentration to wander to your opponent, the outcome of the game or anything that would distract you and get you uptight. Focus on the stretch while you stretch. In other words, stay in the “here & now.”

## **#7 TIGHTEN & RELEASE**

Another quick technique to help you physically loosen up right before that big game is an abbreviation of the progressive muscle relaxation exercise. It involves focusing on any part of you that feels tight at the moment and deliberately tightening it even more for a short amount of time before then releasing the tension. For example, let's say that you have tension up and down your legs, deliberately tighten those already tense muscles even more. Hold the muscle tension for 10 seconds and as you do so, be sure that your concentration is on the feeling of the tension in your leg muscles. Then say to yourself, “let go,” and as you do, slowly release all the muscle tension in that area. Then, repeat the sequence of deliberately tightening the muscles, holding the tension for 10 seconds and releasing. This is a very quick and effective way for you to loosen yourself up right before that big game or important tryout.

## **#8 USING IMAGERY FOR RELAXATION**

You can also effectively calm yourself down by using your imagination to mentally take yourself to a calm, safe place. Sit quietly, close your eyes and imagine yourself going to a totally relaxing place like a favorite beach, mountainside, woods or vacation spot. Experience yourself comfortably enjoying this place in as much detail as possible, seeing, hearing and feeling everything that you would as if you were actually there. Allow yourself to stay in this calming place for 5 – 10 minutes at a time until you feel calm, relaxed and in control. Regular “visits” to this mental “relaxation room” will make it available to you under pressure, right before that big game. However, if you never consistently practice this exercise at home when you’re completely relaxed, then you’ll find that it won’t be “open” and available to you when you need it under big game pressure.





## S T E P 9

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### **PREPARING YOURSELF TO PLAY LIKE A CHAMPION WHEN IT COUNTS THE MOST USING MENTAL REHEARSAL**

Mental rehearsal is a very simple, yet powerful mental skill that you can regularly use to help you stay calm and focused under competitive pressure, build confidence, quickly let go of mistakes and bad breaks and more effectively play to your potential. Mental rehearsal or visualization is nothing more than deliberate “mental practice” where you imagine, in vivid detail, (seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling), playing the perfect game from your warm-up and pre-game ritual, right through to the final tick of the clock including feelings of celebration and accomplishment after the game.

Mental rehearsal works because what you vividly imagine stimulates the nerve-muscle connections involved in the actual movements. Repetitive stimulation of these connections forms a pathway for your muscles to follow once the actual movements are undertaken. In this way, mental rehearsal, when it's properly done leaves you with a confident feeling of preparedness, like you've already been there. With sufficient practice, you can fine-tune this mental skill to the point where you can consistently raise the level of your game.

Follow these simple guidelines to help you master the skill of mental rehearsal and better prepare you for those high pressured games.

- 1.** Always start your imagery sessions with several minutes of relaxation. Your imagery will be far more effective when you're completely relaxed. (DO NOT do imagery when you're anxious)
- 2.** Do NOT use mental rehearsal too close to the actual start of your game. If you do, you will make yourself too nervous to play your best. Some athletes need to stop a day or two before the game. Others can use imagery right up until an hour or so before the actual start. Experiment to discover which time frame works best for you.
- 3.** Make your imagery as vivid and detailed as possible including pictures, sounds, muscle feelings and even smells.
- 4.** Have a specific goal in mind for your mental rehearsal sessions. For example, if you regularly get upset and hang onto your missed shots or mistakes, "practice" quickly letting these go and following them up with strong play. Or practice going all out for every loose ball, guarding aggressively, boxing out and/or taking the shot when you have an open look.
- 5.** Try to feel what you'd be feeling as if you were actually in the game. Your game imagery will be much more effective if you can step into the physical feelings of the play and "practice" these.
- 6.** Have a beginning, middle and end to each of your sessions. The beginning can involve traveling to the game, your warm-up and shoot around, pre-game ritual and the start and first half of the game. The middle could include the start of the second half and the end might include the last few minutes of the game into overtime, as well as the

post game celebration and feelings of excitement and accomplishment, etc.

7. Make your mental rehearsal sessions short. (10 minutes at the most including a 4-5 minute period of relaxation).
8. Always try to imagine what you want to have happen and how you want to feel, NOT what you're afraid will happen or don't want.
9. If your images turn negative at any point in your session, be patient and "rewind" them, replaying the scene again and again until they turn out the way that you want them to.

Keep in mind that mental rehearsal is a learned skill. In the beginning, you may close your eyes and see nothing but a blank slate. Be patient and keep practicing. Just because you can't consciously see, feel or hear anything doesn't mean that your imagery isn't working. You are always making images unconsciously and these images are just as powerful and effective as the ones that you are consciously aware of. When you go to do an imagery session and can't "see" or "feel" anything, just think your way through what you want to be going on in as much detail as possible.

### **USING "COPING IMAGERY" TO EFFECTIVELY HANDLE STRESSFUL SITUATIONS BEFORE AND DURING YOUR GAMES**

Mental rehearsal is a wonderful tool to help you learn to stay calm under pressure and to build confidence in your ability to handle stressors that in the past might have gotten you too nervous to perform your best. Let's say, for example, that seeing a certain opponent that you have to guard would freak you out and undermine your confidence. Use your mental rehearsal session to vividly imagine yourself staying calm, cool and focused in this situation and then playing him perfectly. Similarly, if you tend to get too upset over bad calls, mentally practice refocusing yourself immediately after a bad call and playing with renewed concentration and intensity. If your problem is one of being too nervous pre-game, then mentally practice staying relaxed and in control right before the start of that big game, and then going out there and playing loose and relaxed. Similarly if you have a bad habit of hanging onto your missed shots and then getting tentative, "practice" quickly letting go of a miss and confidently shooting and scoring the very next time that you have an open look.





## STEP

## 10

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### UTILIZING A “CHAMPIONSHIP GAME PLAN” TO PLAY LIKE A CHAMPION

Perhaps one of the biggest mental mistakes that basketball players make at their more pressured games is to go into them taking the wrong goals with them. What are the wrong goals? Anything related to outcome like, **WINNING, SCORING, NEEDING TO MAKE THE TEAM, WANTING TO BEAT A PARTICULAR OPPONENT, WANTING TO PROVE TO THE COACH THAT YOU DESERVE THE STARTING POSITION**, etc. Outcome goals tend to distract you from the task at hand and get you too nervous and tight to play your best. Remember, your outcome goals are strictly a motivational tool for practice only! To perform your best when it counts the most you must learn to “carry” different goals onto the court with you. These goals, when focused on and accomplished, will **GUARANTEE** that you’ll achieve your outcome goals. These goals make up what I call a **CHAMPIONSHIP GAME PLAN**.

What is a **CHAMPIONSHIP GAME PLAN**? A championship game plan is like a **RECIPE FOR PEAK PERFORMANCE**. Like any recipe, it has specific ingredients that must be utilized in order to achieve the desired outcome. Like any recipe, when some of these “ingredients” are omitted, what you end up with will leave you with a “nasty taste” in your mouth! Look over the following mini-goals or “ingredients” of this basic **CHAMPIONSHIP GAME PLAN** and see which ones will help you cook up one mean game:

## **THE CHAMPIONSHIP GAME PLAN**

- 1. STAY LOOSE & RELAXED** – The secret to playing your best when it counts the most lies in your ability to stay mentally and physically loose under pressure. Excessive pre-game nervousness is the number one cause of choking and bad performance. Therefore it is absolutely critical that you have several relaxation tools in your mental toughness toolbox. Simply put, you need to know HOW to relax when the competitive pressure is turned up high. Things you can do pre-game to actually achieve this state of relaxation: Control your breathing; stretch; listen to music; distract yourself with light or funny conversation with teammates; Do **NOT** focus on the importance of the game; Use relaxation techniques. (See section, “Staying cool and calm in the clutch” for these).
- 2. HAVE FUN** – One oftentimes overlooked, but critical ingredient in great games is FUN! If you are having fun **BEFORE** and **WHILE** you play, then chances are good that you will remain loose enough to play your best. Too many athletes wait until after the game before deciding whether they had fun or not, i.e. “When I play well, that’s fun,” or “Let me score twenty points and then I’ll have fun,” or “Let me completely shut down their top scorer and then I’ll enjoy myself!” If you have to wait until after the outcome of the game before you can decide whether you’ve had fun or not, then you’ve got it **BACKWARDS!** You can’t play great basketball at **ANY LEVEL** unless you’re having fun **FIRST! FUN IS AN ABSOLUTE MUST IN ORDER FOR YOU TO DO YOUR BEST.** If you’re **NOT** having fun, then you won’t play well. So before the game, let yourself get into the challenge. Get into

hanging with your friends, laughing, joking and doing whatever is fun for you at the game or tournament.

3. **STAY FOCUSED IN THE “NOW”** – You play your best when you can keep your concentration in the “now” on the play that you’re involved in at that moment. If you are in the past or the future before or during a game, then you will always be a step or two off. The only mental time zone where you have access to all your skills, your shooting touch, quick reaction time and speed is the NOW. Remember, **THE MOST IMPORTANT PLAY IN ANY GAME IS THE ONE THAT YOU’RE INVOLVED WITH RIGHT NOW!**
4. **WHEN YOU “TIMETRAVEL” (PAST OR FUTURE) RECOGNIZE THAT YOU’VE LEFT THE NOW AND QUICKLY AND GENTLY BRING YOUR FOCUS BACK TO THE NOW** – Remember, drifting won’t hurt you as long as you stay on top of it. When your focus lags behind or jumps ahead, quickly return it to the now. Each moment that you play where your focus is in the past or the future is a moment that you’re handicapping yourself, a moment that you’re playing way below your abilities!
5. **PLAY YOUR OWN GAME/FOCUS ON YOU** – Want to beat that annoying opponent? Want to play the kind of basketball that you know you’re fully capable of? If you do, then you’ll stay focused on **YOU** and playing **YOUR** game. Being overly concerned with opponents, teammates, the coaches, the crowd or what other people may think of you will mentally take you out of your game and cause you to play poorly. Focus on YOUR JOB! Stay inside yourself. Play **YOUR OWN** game.
6. **WHEN YOUR FOCUS LEAVES YOU, RECOGNIZE YOU’RE DRIFTING AND QUICKLY AND GENTLY BRING YOUR FOCUS BACK TO YOU** – If you find yourself preoccupied with someone else before or during your games, your immediate job is to catch yourself and quickly return your focus back to your game and what you’re doing in the moment. You can’t play great basketball if you’re distracted by those around you.
7. **KEEP TRACK OF THE “UC’S” (UNCONTROLLABLES)** – Focusing on any uncontrollable either before or during your game will get you uptight, undermine your self-



confidence and ruin your game. Your job going into those high pressured situations is to know what your “UC’S” are and to make sure that your focus stays away from them. If you should find yourself concentrating on an uncontrollable, quickly return your focus to what you are doing. Remember, you can always control how YOU CHOOSE to react to any uncontrollable.

**8. USE LAST MINUTE NEGATIVE THINKING AND SELF-DOUBTS AS A NEUTRAL SIGNAL TO RELAX AND REFOCUS**

– Remember, last minute doubts and negativity are quite normal. When you hear their nasty little chatter in your ears right before the start of the game or just as you’re about to take that crucial one and one, **RELAX**. Do **NOT** engage the negativity. Instead, immediately refocus your concentration on the task at hand. Allowing yourself to “jump in” to the negative thoughts will tend to get you “emotionally hijacked.” Negative thinking and doubts are nothing more than brain wave activity. They do **NOT** predict the future!!!! When you hear them, relax, notice them and then quickly change the channel to refocus on the task at hand.

**9. DON’T THINK, JUST PLAY**

– Playing great basketball is all about feel, flow and reacting and **NOT** about thinking. Thinking is hazardous to your health as a player. You can’t think your way through a good move, three point shot or great game. You have to get out of your own way and allow your muscle memory and instincts to take over. Before that big game, reassure yourself that you’ve paid your physical dues, that you’ve done everything that you can possibly do to prepare and then completely put your concentration on **FEEL** and just **REACT**. Thinking always distracts you from the important task at hand and slows you down.

**10. TRUST AND LET IT HAPPEN**

– If you have made an honest investment in your training, then that great game that you so desperately want is already inside of you as you read these words. How do you get that great game to come out? You have to relax, trust your training, trust your coaching, trust your muscle memory and just let the game come to you. You don’t need to force it. Just let it flow.

**11. USE FOCAL POINTS BEFORE AND DURING YOUR GAMES**

– Since quickly

catching your drifting focus and bringing it back is so important to mental toughness, it is absolutely critical that you have specific focal points that you can return your concentration to. Know ahead of time what your pre-game and during game focal points are. Have a specific pre-game ritual picked out ahead of time that you feel comfortable using. Your ritual provides you with pre-game focal points.

**12. FORGIVE YOURSELF FOR YOUR MISTAKES, MISSED SHOTS AND BAD GAMES, LEARN FROM THEM AND THEN LEAVE THEM IN THE PAST –**

Understand that your success as an athlete is based on your failures. You can not become a champion without failing enough! Therefore, how you handle your failures is absolutely critical to how successful you'll ultimately become. When you have a bad game, look for what you did wrong. **DON'T** waste your time and energy beating yourself up! Getting down on yourself has no constructive value whatsoever. Instead, learn from your mistakes, forgive yourself for being human and then leave the bad game in the PAST where it belongs!

**13. PLAY FROM YOUR HEART, PLAY WITH PASSION –** All too often when the pressure of that big game is turned up high, what gets lost is why you play the game of basketball to begin with. If you're like most serious ball players, when you first started playing, you did so because it made you happy and because you totally loved it! These are your roots and they go straight to your heart. You want to play from your heart, from that love, **NOT** because other people expect you to or you need to prove yourself. Playing good basketball comes directly out of that initial love affair that you once had with the game.

### **USING THE CHAMPIONSHIP GAME PLAN**

Choose all or any number of the above goals that fit for you. Write them down on a piece of paper. Make several copies. Put one up on your wall or mirror in your bedroom, put one inside your locker and keep one in your basketball bag. Look at these goals before your games. Remember their purpose. The game plan is designed to help you stay focused on what's important. After a game, take a few minutes to evaluate your performance in relation to the game plan. That is, ask

yourself, “on a scale of 1 – 10, where 1 = not at all and 10 = a perfect job, how well did I accomplish each goal?” Answers of 7- 8 or less indicate the need for more improvement on that particular goal for your next game. Answers of 9 or 10 indicate that you executed that particular goal quite effectively. Remember, the way to get to that great game is by following the goals of the **CHAMPIONSHIP GAME PLAN**.

## S T E P

## 1 1

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### **PLAYING YOUR ROLE ON THE TEAM TO THE VERY BEST OF YOUR ABILITY**

As the sports psychology consultant to the 1999 NCAA Men's National Champion University of Connecticut Huskies, I witnessed a very interesting phenomenon over the course of the season and during the the NCAA tournament. Being a nationally ranked program, UConn attracted a lot of very talented ball players. Almost all of these athletes had been superstars on their high school and AAU teams. However, at UConn, they were no longer special since everyone on the team was that good.

As a result, a number of these really talented ball players saw only limited playing time at Connecticut. Instead of playing, their main role on the team was as a "support" player. Of course, what that meant was that they spent a lot of time riding the bench. For many of these guys it was never a question as to whether they'd start. There was no way they were ever going to break into the starting line-up that year. The squad was just too talented! So



while they worked their butts off in practice and did everything that all the starters did, they never got to reap the benefits in playing time. They just never saw too much of it! A very tough and painful transition for someone who was used to playing all of the time and getting all of the limelight. What did these guys really want to be doing? Duhhhhhh! Well, nobody who is serious about this game joins a team so they can ride the pine and collect splinters.

However, for a team to be successful, every athlete has an important role to play on the team. Fair or unfair, good or bad, this role is assigned to them by the coach. If a player is unhappy about his role and he “shares” his unhappiness with all those around him, the whole team suffers. Why? Because you can’t create a championship team without each athlete on that squad accepting his/her role and then playing it to the very best of his/her ability.

What was the role of these UConn “support” players? Their job was to push the starters in practice and make them better. Their starting teammates respected them for this. The role players kept the starters honest. The role players physically and emotionally challenged the starters on a daily basis. In my opinion this was one of the more important reasons why the Huskies won the National Championship that year. They played as a team, everyone accepted their role, and most important, everyone respected each other.

But let’s be honest here. Being a role player is not much fun. In fact, it’s by far the most difficult position to play on any team. It is frustrating, oftentimes boring and frequently demoralizing. You have to work just as hard, if not harder than all the starters, but you get no glory for your efforts. It seems that you work in obscurity. No one ever sees much of you outside of practice. However, if you truly would like to be a winner, then part of your job is to not only accept the role that the coach assigns you, but to try to play that role to the very best of your ability. Don’t go kidding yourself into believing that just because you don’t get into a game, that you’re not of value to your team. Your worth, in my opinion, is of equal value to the guys that get all the playing time.

What you want to do as that role player is to act like the champion that you are, to act like you are a valuable and contributing member of the squad. If some of the starters treat

you disrespectfully, then know in your heart that they are simply too selfish and stupid to understand what a championship team is all about. When you sit the bench, keep your head up and in the game. Support your teammates. Stay positive! Stay focused on the action and especially on what is going on in your position. You never know when your chance will come and when it does, you want to be ready for it. If you are truly miserable about your role on the team, then commit yourself to doing something about it both in practice and over the course of the off season. Work harder. Strengthen your weaknesses. Get in better physical condition. Work on your ball handling skills. Do whatever it takes to get better.

However, do **NOT** sit on the bench and show your unhappiness. Do **NOT** sit on the bench and criticize the coach in your head. Do not put a long face on and whine to your teammates about what a raw deal you're getting. This will only serve to make you unhappier and further distract you from the game. Remember, your job is to play basketball. Your job is NOT to criticize or evaluate the coaching decisions.

Be a winner. Accept your role. Act like a champion and support the starters. Keep your head in the game. Don't lose heart. Use your frustration and disappointment to motivate you into working harder. Your time will eventually come.

**REMEMBER:** Awareness is the key to change, the key to improvement. You have to know what you are doing wrong before you can correct it. Are you **AWARE** of your focus of concentration and self-talk when you sit the bench? What's your attitude like? Are you in the game or in your head being ticked off at the coach? Are you supporting your team or thinking that the guy playing in front of you is nowhere as good as you? Spend a few minutes right now to **HONESTLY** answer these questions and rate the kind of role player you are.



(Use true (T) or false (F) answers)

1. I spend a lot of time on the bench during games being angry and upset
2. I think the coach is wrong in his assessment of me
3. During games I question why certain guys are playing and I'm not
4. I frequently lose track of the game and drift off when I sit the bench
5. My feeling is that if I can't play, why should I be on this team
6. I typically resent the starters
7. I'm willing to do anything for this team
8. I believe if I work hard enough I'll eventually get my chance
9. I actively support the starters during the game
10. I see the point in working hard in practice even if I'm never going to play
11. I understand and accept that my playing time is completely the coach's decision
12. I am willing to be a role player if this is will help our team win

**SCORING/INTERPRETATION:** Assign a "0" value for each "T" you answered for questions 1 – 6 and a "1" value for each "F" you answered. Assign a "1" value for each "T" you answered for questions 7 – 12 and a "0" value for each "F" you answered.

The higher your score, the better you are attitude-wise as a role player. If you scored between 10 and 12 you have accepted your role and you're helping the team with your presence. This kind of attitude will also help you continue to improve as a player. However, if your score was below 6, then you need some serious attitude readjustment work. Your attitude is hurting your squad and will eventually hold you back in your development as a good player. Remember, you don't have to like being a role player. You don't have to like sitting on the bench. That's not the issue. No one likes not playing. The issue is learning to play that role well for the team, if that's the one you've been assigned. That's what winners do.

## **CONCLUSION**

Once you get to that big game, how well you play depends almost entirely on how mentally tough you are. Remember what I said when we started this program: “In games and at other times when it really counts the most to you, basketball is 95% mental and 5% physical.” Don’t leave this all-important mental side of your game to chance. Your mind is far too powerful a force to leave untrained. Harness the awesome power of your mind today by beginning to systematically work on developing mental toughness. Use this workbook to strengthen your mental muscles, build your self-confidence and help you stay cool and calm in the clutch. Remember, you can’t play winning basketball without using your head. So start today to systematically develop the mind of a champion.

## WORKSHEET #1

### SELF-TALK AND BAD PERFORMANCES

(Bad game #1)

What was your self-talk/thoughts .....

- 1) .....the day of the game?
- 2) .....during your warm-up?
- 3) .....just before the game started?
- 4) .....after you lost a loose ball or missed an easy shot?
- 5) .....after making a mistake?
- 6) .....when a teammate or coach yelled at you?
- 7) .....when a call went against you?
- 8) .....against a particularly aggressive, trash talking opponent?
- 9) ..... when you were substituted out?
- 10) .....If your team lost the game?

## WORKSHEET #1

### SELF-TALK AND BAD PERFORMANCES

(Bad game #2)

What was your self-talk/thoughts .....

- 1).....the day of the game?
- 2).....during your warm-up?
- 3).....just before the game started?
- 4).....after you lost a loose ball or missed an easy shot?
- 5).....after making a mistake?
- 6).....when a teammate or coach yelled at you?
- 7).....when a call went against you?
- 8) ..... against a particularly aggressive, trash talking opponent?
- 9) ..... when you were substituted out?
- 10) .....If your team lost the game?

WORKSHEET #1

SELF-TALK AND BAD PERFORMANCES

(Bad game #3)

What was your self-talk/thoughts .....

- 1).....the day of the game?
- 2).....during your warm-up?
- 3).....just before the game started?
- 4).....after you lost a loose ball or missed an easy shot?
- 5).....after making a mistake?
- 6).....when a teammate or coach yelled at you?
- 7).....when a call went against you?
- 8) .....against a particularly aggressive, trash talking opponent?
- 9) ..... when you were substituted out?
- 10) .....If your team lost the game?

## WORKSHEET #2

### SELF-TALK AND GOOD PERFORMANCES

(Good game #1)

What were your self-talk/thoughts.....

- 1).....the day of the game?
- 2).....during your warm-up?
- 3).....just before the game started?
- 4).....after you lost a loose ball or missed an easy shot?
- 5).....after making a mistake?
- 6).....when a teammate or coach yelled at you?
- 7).....when a call went against you?
- 8)....against a particularly aggressive, trash talking opponent?
- 9) ..... when you were substituted out?
- 10) .....If your team lost the game?



## WORKSHEET #2

### SELF-TALK AND GOOD PERFORMANCES

(Good game #2)

What were your self-talk/thoughts.....

- 1).....the day of the game?
- 2).....during your warm-up?
- 3).....just before the game started?
- 4).....after you lost a loose ball or missed an easy shot?
- 5).....after making a mistake?
- 6).....when a teammate or coach yelled at you?
- 7).....when a call went against you?
- 8)....against a particularly aggressive, trash talking opponent?
- 9) ..... when you were substituted out?
- 10) .....If your team lost the game?

## WORKSHEET #2

### SELF-TALK AND GOOD PERFORMANCES

(Good game #3)

What were your self-talk/thoughts.....

- 1).....the day of the game?
- 2).....during your warm-up?
- 3).....just before the game started?
- 4).....after you lost a loose ball or missed an easy shot?
- 5).....after making a mistake?
- 6).....when a teammate or coach yelled at you?
- 7).....when a call went against you?
- 8)....against a particularly aggressive, trash talking opponent?
- 9) ..... when you were substituted out?
- 10) .....If your team lost the game?

### WORKSHEET #3

#### CONCENTRATION AND GOOD PERFORMANCES

(Good game #1)

Where was your focus of concentration.....

- 1) ....the day of the game?
- 2) ....during warm-up?
- 3) ....just before the game started?
- 4) ....after you made a mistake or threw up an air ball?
- 5) ....after you made a great play?
- 6) ....when the refs made bad calls?
- 7) ....after getting beaten by your opponent?
- 8) ....during half-time?
- 9) ....when you went to take a crucial shot?
- 10) ....during overtime?
- 11) ....against a strong, very physical opponent?
- 12) ....in the game's final minutes?
- 13)....if the coach yelled at you?

### WORKSHEET #3

#### CONCENTRATION AND GOOD PERFORMANCES

(Good game #2)

Where was your focus of concentration.....

- 1)....the day of the game?
- 2)....during warm-up?
- 3)....just before the game started?
- 4)....after you made a mistake or threw up an air ball?
- 5)....after you made a great play?
- 6)....when the refs made bad calls?
- 7)....after getting beaten by your opponent?
- 8)....during half-time?
- 9)....when you went to take a crucial shot?
- 10)....during overtime?
- 11)....against a strong, very physical opponent?
- 12)....in the game's final minutes?
- 13)....if the coach yelled at you?

### WORKSHEET #3

#### CONCENTRATION AND GOOD PERFORMANCES

(Good game #3)

Where was your focus of concentration.....

- 1)....the day of the game?
- 2)....during warm-up?
- 3)....just before the game started?
- 4)....after you made a mistake or threw up an air ball?
- 5)....after you made a great play?
- 6)....when the refs made bad calls?
- 7)....after getting beaten by your opponent?
- 8)....during half-time?
- 9)....when you went to take a crucial shot?
- 10)....during overtime?
- 11)....against a strong, very physical opponent?
- 12)....in the game's final minutes?
- 13)....if the coach yelled at you?

## WORKSHEET #4

### CONCENTRATION AND BAD PERFORMANCES

(Bad game #1)

Where was your focus of concentration.....

- 1)....the day of the game?
- 2)....during warm-up?
- 3)....just before the game started?
- 4)....after you made a mistake or missed a shot?
- 5)....after you made a great play?
- 6)....when the refs made bad calls?
- 7)....after getting beaten by your opponent?
- 8)....during half-time?
- 9)....when you went to take a crucial shot?
- 10)....during overtime?
- 11)....against a strong, very physical opponent?
- 12)....in the game's final minutes?
- 13)....if the coach yelled at you?

## WORKSHEET #4

### CONCENTRATION AND BAD PERFORMANCES

(Bad game #2)

Where was your focus of concentration.....

- 1)....the day of the game?
- 2)....during warm-up?
- 3)....just before the game started?
- 4)....after you made a mistake or missed a shot?
- 5)....after you made a great play?
- 6)....when the refs made bad calls?
- 7)....after getting beaten by your opponent?
- 8)....during half-time?
- 9)....when you went to take a crucial shot?
- 10)....during overtime?
- 11)....against a strong, very physical opponent?
- 12)....in the game's final minutes?
- 13)....if the coach yelled at you?

## WORKSHEET #4

### CONCENTRATION AND BAD PERFORMANCES

(Bad game #3)

Where was your focus of concentration.....

- 1)....the day of the game?
- 2)....during warm-up?
- 3)....just before the game started?
- 4)....after you made a mistake or missed a shot?
- 5)....after you made a great play?
- 6)....when the refs made bad calls?
- 7)....after getting beaten by your opponent?
- 8)....during half-time?
- 9)....when you went to take a crucial shot?
- 10)....during overtime?
- 11)....against a strong, very physical opponent?
- 12)....in the game's final minutes?
- 13)....if the coach yelled at you?



WORKSHEET #5

DO YOU PLAY BETTER IN PRACTICE THAN YOU DO IN GAMES?

(Compare and contrast)

PRACTICE

GAMES

What do you tend to focus on.....

- 1) ....before you get to the game?
- 2) ....during warm-ups?
- 3) ....just before the opening tip (game or practice)
- 4) ....when you begin to feel tired?
- 5) ....when you mess up?
- 6) ....when you get outplayed?
- 7) ....when the coach criticizes you?
- 8) ....when you sit on the bench?
- 9) How much do you concentrate on other players?
- 10) How much does your focus drift to the future & outcome?
- 11) How much do you compare yourself?
- 12) How much time do you spend focusing on what you think you are doing poorly?
- 13) How easily distracted are you?

WORKSHEET #6

SIGNS OF GOOD NERVOUS

Great game #1

Great game #2

Physical signs  
(in body)

Physical signs

Mental signs  
(thinking/focusing)

Mental signs

Behavioral signs  
(how I acted pregame)

Behavioral signs

WORKSHEET #7

SIGNS OF BAD (OR NOT ENOUGH) NERVOUS

Bad game #1

Bad game #2

Physical signs  
(in body)

Physical signs

Mental signs  
(thinking/focusing)

Mental signs

Behavioral signs  
(how I acted pregame)

Behavioral signs

# Dr. Alan Goldberg

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